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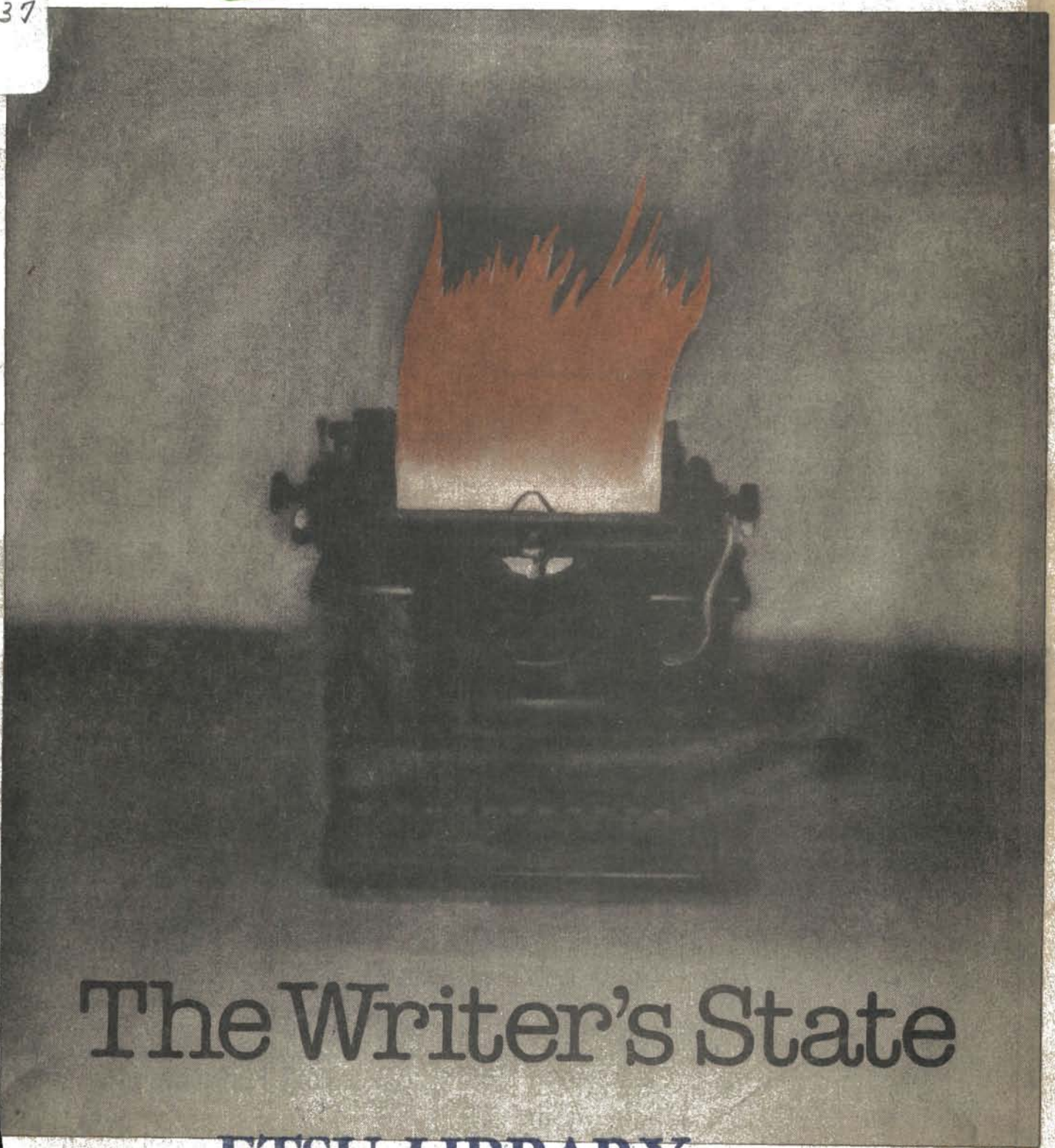

The Writer's State

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The Writer's State

Conglomerate takeovers in the communications industry are nothing new. And the rightward political shift in this country is by now a well-chewed cud of punditry. It is the intersection of the concentration and the New Right that has scared, enraged and begun to transform those who care about the state of the literary art.

For the writer's state is intimately intertwined with the state of the national culture, and that in turn is an important index of the state of the state. The conglomerate that runs Washington these days as Ceasars Palace runs Vegas—complete with a greeter in the White House—probably regards writers as entertainers and books as properties. In fact, writers are also democracy's prophets, consciences, revolutionaries, reformers, *griots*, truthsayers and most fervent practitioners. Out there alone on a smile and a shoestring, he or she collects dreams and visions for Willy Loman and the rest of us. When writers are in trouble, so are we all: attention must be paid.

Yet consider the state to which the writer has descended today. Novelists from Kurt Vonnegut (*Slaughterhouse Five*, et al.) to Anon. (*Go Ask Alice*) have their books snatched from library shelves by the New Puritan zealots. Eager investigative reporters find doors they once barged through nailed shut by new restrictions on the Freedom of Information Act; the names of agents bill threatens to become an Official Secrets Act; and as for Deep Throat, he, she or they is/are not talking because a judge might make Woodstein reveal his, etc. name in court some day. Elementary and high school reading lists are censored, library subsidies eliminated. Minority writers find themselves publishing's darlings one day and publisherless the next, as the fickle winds of fashion change. First novelists no longer get that small but pride-salving advance, and as for a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities—don't count on it; Reagan's budget cutters have blue-penciled the grant money that might have provided a spell of austere leisure to write. The radical researcher in academe is underfunded, if at all, while his probusiness colleagues are showered with Scaife-Mobil-Freedom Foundation largess. We are titillated when Ms. X, the writer of sexy hammock reads, finds herself slapped with a libel suit, under the precedent of the *Bindrim* case (sorry, Mr. Proust, everyone around the Faubourg St.-Germain knows who the Baron de Charlus really is); nonetheless, libel suits have become a sword that can be wielded against critics of the political system [see Eve Pell, "Libel as a Political Weapon," *The Nation*, June 6]. Then there is Joe Hollywood, who has just lost a fortune because his agent didn't think to nail down the laserprinter rights to his smashingly successful sitcom. Even the sci-fi writers are having trouble keeping up with the technological revolution in communications. Meanwhile, that cherished figure, the twinkling old bookseller who knows every title in the place and can pull out just the thing to doze off with in a deck chair on the Mauretania (or the bygone classic you had always been meaning to read), is gone the way of the great liners, and in his place are the fast-book chains. No room in these gleaming, aseptic marts of literary "product" for the slim (or fat) volume of poetry.

The litany could go on, but the point is that a crisis exists, and it threatens to get worse before it gets better. The purpose of this special issue is to inventory the discontents, to explore their social and political content and identify their wider implications. It is our hope that the delegates to the American Writers Congress, which meets in New York City at the Roosevelt Hotel over Columbus Day weekend, will ponder this conglomeration of grievances and begin action to overcome them.

—*The Editors*

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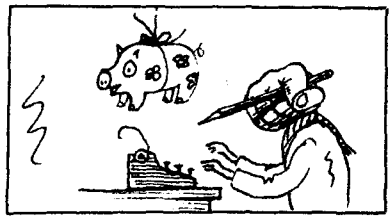

LITERARY SITUATIONS

Love, Money and Conglomerates

WILLIAM McPHERSON

Writers are a notoriously whiny bunch, perhaps because their work is just the opposite of sex: it's awful while you're doing it. Geniuses one and all, they're impoverished and unrecognized, given to self-pity and paranoia, night sweats and cigarettes and mind-altering drugs. Recognized, they're much the same, but then they have accountants and some of the complaints are different. They are not altogether unlike the beast they love to flog—publishers—only publishers always have more money, which, as Marx and St. Paul have told us, is the root of it and makes them different from you and me.

It's the money—not his own, of course—that allows the publisher to pick at the turbot far from the ivy so poisonous to prestige in the Four Seasons Grill and acquire a comforting familiarity with the wine list, neither of which he learned at his mother's knee but both of which he is occasionally pleased to share with the less fortunate: those who turn out the stuff that sometimes earns the money to pay for, among other pleasures, the turbot and the wine. The publisher at one of these lunches is easily identified. He (or she, of course) wears the affable smile and the designer costume that may look as if it came from the army surplus store but didn't. He's the one who, if he's dieting, as he of necessity often is, sips the mineral water that flows from this year's obscure Pyrenean spring. He's the one who might sample the raspberries if they're out of season, and it should go without saying that he's the one who always signs the enormous check, his own check signed as likely as not by a manufacturer of television sets. The writer, on the other hand, is the hungry one with the real drink and the look that is alternately worried and pathetically eager, the one putting away the *mousse au chocolat* and edging just a little farther from the bill; the true Marxist devoted to the master's injunction, "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs." Publishers need words, and the writer has to eat.

That, as they say more and more these days, is the bottom line. The connection with contemporary publishing is basic. The connection with literature and ideas is and probably always has been tangential at best, and yet literature and ideas are what books—even the worst of them—are supposed to be about. Books are what writers continue to write and publishers to publish in astonishing quantities, against the odds, despite the virtual disappearance of the personal bookstore (where one could expect to find a person who might actually have read and liked a book) and its reincarnation as a supermarket chain purveying the best-seller list, in which a book not in stock is a book you might as well forget about and the back list is what you find on the remainder shelves, if you get there before the shredder. Despite, in fact, the virtual disappearance of the traditional publisher, a gentleman of independent means and parsimonious habits learned at his father's knee—at least as effective a teacher as, say, the Harvard Business School.

Nonetheless, an idiosyncratic publishing monarch was responsible mainly to himself. His company is now likely to be found—under the old familiar name—toward the back of a glossy corporate report, listed among the other companies in the entertainment division. (Its position accurately reflects its status.) He himself is likely to be doddering or dead. God knows who's responsible now, though any publishing executive would be happy to tell you. As a rule, conglomerates and corporate committees are less inclined to risk a little cash on unpublished, immature but ripening talents than was the benevolent despot of the putatively happy past. They'd rather risk a lot on one known name, nice for the name but regrettable for the rest. Risks are still taken, but perhaps less often, and the small book-business is dominated by the vast entertainment industry it attempts to feed. But that's show biz, and nobody ever claimed it was a gentleman's profession.

Distinction in writing has no necessary relation to amount of reward, if any; it never did. The size of the advance is in proportion to the anticipated sales, and it always has been; royalties, to the books actually sold. The individual writer had it no better, no easier, in the old days of independent, family-owned houses, nor was the quality of books—or tastes—any higher. Money was as hard to come by as genuine talent, though easier to recognize then and now, and the surplus of the semi-talented still matches the surplus of the semiliterate. Concentration in publishing has not yet had the effect of silencing any real writer or keeping any new idea long out of circulation, though on the less profitable end of the spectrum—particularly serious fiction, poetry and the more advanced nonfiction—it has made it more difficult to be published and distributed commercially. A $1,000 advance for a novel, not unknown fifteen years ago, is as rare today as the pterodactyl (and would be about as welcome). Those $1,000 novels are not getting bigger money; they're not getting any money at all. Many of them are getting exactly what they deserve. Some are not. But some are, in fact, getting published by those small but interesting noncommercial and usually nonprofitable presses such as Black Sparrow, Sun & Moon, the Fiction Collective and Entwhistle Books (which has just published a first novel by Tom Carson, *Twisted Kicks*, that would have graced the house of Knopf). And some—the names come randomly to mind—Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, Elizabeth Hardwick, John Hawkes, Thomas Pynchon, John Cheever, Ian McEwan, John Irving, E. L. Doctorow—disparate but serious writers all, are published by major commercial houses.

A few years ago at a convention of the Association of American Publishers (in Bermuda, via expense account), which was notable for the absence of people actually reading books, Representative Morris K. Udall said, "If any industry has a social responsibility, it is the publishers of books, for we face a

William McPherson has been an editor at a once privately held publishing house and was editor of The Washington Post Book World. *He is writing a novel under contract to a conglomerate and has written short stories, unpublished, and poems, some of them published.*

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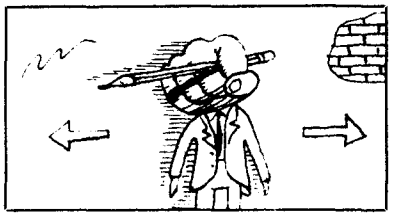
loss of communication and an acute absence of ideas in almost every other medium, the principal culprit being concentration and lust for the dollar." By and large, most publishers of books are—however imperfectly, however much they may lust for the dollar—aware of their social responsibility. The danger to discourse, to the communication of ideas, to the dissemination of the culture lies less with them than it does with the far more concentrated electronic media. There are pages of publishers listed in *Literary Market Place* (and hundreds more that are not); there are three major commercial television networks, and their audience on any given night is greater than the audience in any given year for all the books published in the United States. That is concentrated power, and that is something to be concerned about, to be frightened by.

At that same A.A.P. convention, a dean at the University of Southern California gave an illustrated talk titled "The Future Is Now." In it she observed that it is becoming "increasingly difficult to differentiate between 'education' and 'entertainment.'. . . An instructional package, or even a textbook . . . just isn't going to be competitive any more. We must develop what I call a Matrix Educational Delivery System [that would provide] a range of programmatic and delivery modules which individually may either stand alone or be plugged into each other." A slide flashed on the screen (before the projector malfunctioned, giving heart to some of us). It showed a woman standing happily before her television set, into which she was about to plug a videocassette. "With this cassette," the dean exclaimed, "you can put any book you want, any book you've got, on videotape and it can be useful to the person living at home!" Particularly if the person can't read.

The vital question, of course, is which book goes on the cassette and who or which committee makes that crucial decision. Considering the high cost of such technology, you can bet it's not going to be the literary men but a committee in the marketing and sales division. Not everything that sells is ipso facto bad—Flaubert and Melville both had enormously popular successes—but it isn't necessarily good, either, and when every one of these "books" has to earn out its investment—and such a huge investment at that—the lowest common denominator of intellectual and artistic rigor will surely prevail. Complexity, ambiguity, difficulty—any unpalatable idea will be reduced to blandness and banality, if, indeed it ever gets anywhere near the cassette. But it will be easy to absorb; anyone can get plugged in to that.

Publishing is a business, then and now a rather curious and eccentric and enormously powerful one. Much of it takes place in restaurants, on expense accounts. Writing is a talent, curious and eccentric and powerful in its own quite different and unique way. It's not done at lunch. Any serious writer who exercises his talent solely for money is laboring under a grave misapprehension of the way the world works. Coleridge's advice, given in 1817, still holds: "Never pursue literature as a trade. . . . Money and immediate reputation form only an arbitrary and accidental end of literary labor. The *hope* of increasing them by any given exertion will often prove a stimulant; but the *necessity* of acquiring them will in all works of genius convert the stimulant into a *narcotic*."

Talent—genius, if you will—survives the most stringent oppression. Quality and distinction are in almost all cases recognized eventually; it's only a matter of luck and timing (but the timing, unfortunately, can be way off). So back to the books, everybody. Talk is pleasant, but the real work is done in that lonely place where the mind directs the words to the page, and where the mysterious, inscrutable imagination still lives, if it doesn't exactly flourish.



PITFALLS

Lies, Truth and Ideologues

BARBARA GRIZZUTI HARRISON

One Christmas Eve, when my brother was 5 and I was 10, we made a tour of our neighborhood; every time we saw a Christmas tree—and this was in the heart of Italian Brooklyn, so we saw dozens—my brother said, "It's ugly. Isn't it?" "Yes," I said. "Ugly." We were obliged to believe Christmas trees were ugly, having been brought up in an eccentric religious sect (known, among its adherents, as The Truth), and instructed to believe that the celebration of Christmas was not only pagan but demonic: Satan lurked behind each twinkling star, beguiling us with tinsel. How smug—having possession of The Truth—we sounded to each other. But my brother's face, covered with snot and tears, belied his certainty; in fact, he thought the trees were beautiful. So did I. But I was a more practiced liar than he; my eyes were dry. Fifteen years later, when I decorated my first Christmas tree, I said, "Isn't it lovely not to have The Truth? One can tell the truth."

"How I hated The Truth," my brother said. He is an honest man.

That I grew up to be a writer can be explained in one of two ways: Since I was an accomplished (and unhappy) liar at an early age, I naturally chose a profession that would enable me to weave fictions around facts, that would give me scope to dissimulate and dissemble—and get paid for it. This explanation delights people who are pleased to believe that all writers are liars. If you believe all writers are fundamentally dishonest—a notion even some writers subscribe to—you can discount everything you have no wish to hear, just as if you believe all writers are neurotic, you can modify everything you read, bearing in mind the writer's disfiguring neuroses. There is another explanation, which naturally I prefer: When I finally learned to tell the truth, I was driven—to write. Naturally I prefer to think of writers as people who need to tell the truth because their sanity depends upon it.

When John Updike received the MacDowell Medal this summer, he said, almost wistfully, "Writers do try to tell the truth."

They do if they're truthful writers. If they're hacks or ideologues, they can't—or won't.

If you sell yourself a bill of goods, you're bound to want to sell the world a

Barbara Grizzuti Harrison is the author of Visions of Glory: A History and a Memory of the Jehovah's Witnesses *(Simon and Schuster) and* Off Center *(Dial Press).*

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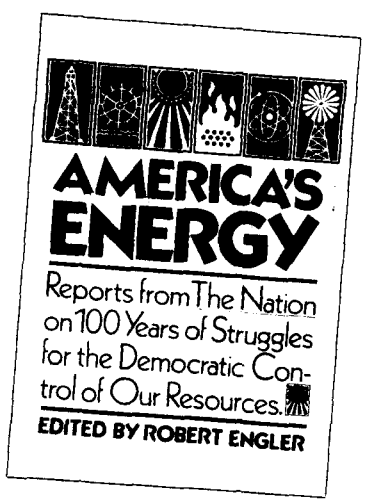
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bill of goods; to do otherwise is to place in jeopardy your acquired ideas and your acquired identity, and so to make a fool of yourself. If it is true that affection can pervert judgment, it's also true that political expediency can pervert your heart's true affections, making it impossible to *see* the truth, which is often inconvenient, muddling, dispiriting, distressing. It may be true—I think it is true—that the truth sets you free; unfortunately (or not, depending upon your point of view), the only thing it sets you free to do is tell the truth. Which does not always win you popularity contests, nor does it secure for you peace of mind.

Examples come to mind: *No enemies on the left.* I can't think of anything more damaging—to the left—than this bit of moral idiocy. Who were all those people (among them writers) who refused to sign petitions recently, acknowledging that the North Vietnamese, for whom so many of us had marched, were not treating their fellow countrymen adorably after the war was over? Did they believe they'd lose their marching stripes if they told the truth—which was that once again human nature had asserted itself and (sad old story) the victims had once again become the victimizers? Whose interests are served by keeping silent on such issues?

Is it good for the Jews? A Jewish friend of mine came to grief because she wrote a novel in which a Displaced Person was decidedly not noble. This is bad for the Jews, the Jewish press said, especially now, when anti-Semitism is baying at our heels. My friend agreed that anti-Semitism appeared to be on the rise; but, she said, if you use that kind of logic, *now* is never the time to tell the truth. The truth exists for some halcyon day in the future—which day will never come. I agree with her; to reserve the truth for a propitious time is to treat the truth as if it were a commodity to be delivered when the time—or the price—is right.

Where Oppression and Sex are concerned, ideology has a terrible way of interfering with truth, another way of saying that truth—as observed, experienced and emotionally perceived—has a nasty way of unsettling the tidy mass of coherent beliefs we call ideology, which mass of beliefs explains the world and all its working parts to ideologues. This is particularly so now that sex has (God help us) become "politicized."

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For example, it is no longer possible to say in print that you have experienced vaginal orgasms (which might imply a dependence on men) without at least seventy-five people telling you that you made it all up. Doris Lessing, in *The Golden Notebook*, got away with saying she believed in vaginal orgasms; but then she redeemed herself by falling in love with the healing properties of insanity, and advanced the now popular notion that all the loonies were outside the loony bins and all the sane people were inside, a notion luxuriously held by writers *outside* loony bins (who are not, one notices, clamoring to get in).

Another way for a writer to get in trouble is to say what he or she feels to be true about abortion—as both Linda Bird Francke and Walker Percy have had occasion to discover. Abortion brings unforeseen, often devastating, emotional consequences, Francke wrote. "These are things we say only to one another, now, while the barricades are up" was, by and large, the response of prochoice feminists to Francke's really nonincendiary book, *The Ambivalence of Abortion*. In other words, we put the truth on hold when we are fighting for a cause; we don't "give ammunition to the enemy." Percy, in a *New York Times* op-ed piece, said, in effect: Let's not kid ourselves. Abortion is killing; if you're going to do it, at least know what it is you're doing.

Percy's case was an interesting one. He wrote, he said, as a doctor, and as a novelist (a novelist's duty being to tell the truth); he wrote the truth as he saw the truth. It was what he *didn't* say that infuriated people. Percy is a Roman Catholic, and he neglected to say that his Catholicism informed his sensibility. I have a few things to say about that: One is that anyone who thinks there is unanimity of opinion among Catholics about anything, including abortion rights, is blind, or mad, or bigoted. Another is, do we require that everyone who writes on issues touching morality declare his or her credentials: *I am a secular humanist . . . I am a liberal Jew . . . I am a conservative Catholic . . . I am a Freudian WASP . . .* ? (Think of all the terrible pieces you've read that *have* begun with the writer's credentials: *As a black lesbian feminist mother who lives in Middle America . . . As a recently divorced father, a white urban heterosexual male who takes care of his children . . .*)

Of course we all have biases; we all "lean." (I, for example, lean toward Rome.) But the truth of any particular experience or circumstance can change the angle of our tilt—if we allow it to. (To assume a new position often hurts, especially if you have been mired, rigidly, in one dearly held, familiar, position.)

When Alice K. Turner lived on Sheridan Square, she tilted. She disliked the fact that the area was becoming a Times Square for homosexuals, and the assumption, on the part of many homosexuals, that the neighborhood belonged exclusively to them. And poor Alice tried to say so, in *The Village Voice*. From the flap at the editorial offices of *The Voice* and in the gay community (to which the article—never published—was leaked) one would have thought she was Anita Bryant, which she is not. She would have voted one-two-three for civil rights for gays, but she told the truth as she experienced it, which was that Christopher Street was no longer a congenial place for many of the people who had always lived there. (This too is known as "giving ammunition to the enemy.") The Moral Majority had not yet been inflicted upon us at the time Turner wrote her piece—lucky for her, because otherwise she would surely have been accused of being one of *them*. Nowadays, in liberal-left circles, anybody who writes favorably about traditional values is likely to be accused—as Betty Friedan recently was—of bringing comfort to the Moral Majority. What nonsense.

One is familiar with the argument that the oppressed must be the ones to break the truth barrier: Only the oppressed have the right to address themselves to their oppression. The rest of us, not having the privilege of being among the underprivileged, must yield. I do not hold to this. For one thing, I think it is an argument that condescends to the oppressed. It implies that they, in order not to be oppressed, must be in all ways better, more "soulful," more just, more generous of understanding than those of us who do not find ourselves among a recognizably oppressed group. What a burden to place upon victims!

And think of our loss as readers if, say, Paul Scott, an Englishman, had not written about colonized Indians. Scott—whom I have heard called a racist (I couldn't believe my ears) for daring to write about colonial India—wrote, in *The Raj Quartet*, about both the British and the Indians, the colonizers and the colonized. He gave us a world. He gave us a world in which even the British colonialists had hearts and souls. That, among ideologues, was his crime. Colonialists—or the hapless sons and daughters thereof—*do* have hearts and souls, however (arguably) tainted and corrupt; but far easier to believe they are all simply, uncomplicatedly wicked. Scott knew that colonialism was wicked, but that not all the British who ever lived in India were wicked. An obvious distinction and a difference, one would think. Ideologues do not think so.

Think also of the trouble James Baldwin found himself in when, during the height of Black Power, he argued against militant exclusivity. We kill our writers by forcing party lines upon them; I am not comfortable in a world in which men like James Baldwin are censured for speaking from their informed hearts.

I'm also, very sadly, remembering how roundly Albert Camus was savaged by the left—which excommunicated him—when he brought his grandmother into evidence during the debate over Algerian independence. (She lived in Algeria, you'll remember, and Camus loved her, and saw the awful truth of her situation.) I happen to believe that Camus was wrong on the basic issue—Jean-Paul Sartre was right—but how could Camus *not* have brought his grandmother, who was not an abstraction, into evidence and remained true to himself?

The villain is an all-controlling ideology.

Ideology will do it every time. When Jacobo Timerman declared that there

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was virulent anti-Semitism in Argentina, neoconservatives went wild trying to prove that it was not so—ignoring what one might, if one were not an ideologue, recognize to be a salient fact: Twenty thousand people have disappeared in Argentina. I don't know if 2,000 or 18,000 of those people were Jews. The fact is, they have disappeared. This fact managed to get lost. (Timerman also said that Americans, not excepting liberal American writers, were not so much pro-dissident as anti-Soviet. I am delighted to see P.E.N. supporting Latin American dissidents as well as Eastern European dissidents. Still, how many Central American refugee-writers have been feted lately?)

Even the book-blurb business is corrupted by party-line loyalties. It amuses me, always, to see a book blurbed by the same three people who are touted, *in the book*, as "role models," "heroines," "heroes," etc. Actually, it enrages me. Men have always had the dubious distinction of being good at this particular brand of cronyism; women are catching up. . . . Lovely, of course, if a friend's book is really good—but unconscionable to pretend, and to pretend because the writer is "ideologically correct."

As to fiction: There, one is free to invent. To invent, yes. To lie, no. One doesn't put quotes around rhetoric and call it dialogue in order to advance a cause. Novels do not exist for special pleading. Novels exist to be true—as Muriel Spark says, not "literally and photographically" true, but true nonetheless. Mary Gordon is a Catholic writer, but her books have their own inevitability; they do not make a case for the Curia. Quite the opposite. Novels do not exist for propaganda purposes. D.M. Thomas did not, in *The White Hotel*, write that splendid, terrible chapter about Babi Yar to instruct us; he wrote it because—I should think—he maintained fidelity to his own obsessive vision, in the course of which he nourished us, fed us with that indignation which is a form of love.

Novels by ideologues seldom surprise us. That is because ideologues do not allow *themselves* to be surprised; the end is known from the beginning. In real life: No. In real life, and in real writing, life astonishes us. And tempts and tries us, what a joy and what a curse—a joy that can be celebrated by writing the truth, a curse against which the only incantation is telling the truth. □

Capitol Airlines

I don't like the government where I live
I don't like dictatorship of the Rich
I don't like bureaucrats telling me what to eat
I don't like Police dogs sniffing round my feet

I don't like Communist Censorship of my books
I don't like Marxists complaining about my looks
I don't like Castro insulting members of my sex
Leftists insisting we got the mystic Fix

I don't like Capitalists selling me gasoline Coke
Multinationals burning Amazon trees to smoke
Big Corporation takeover media mind
I don't like the Top-bananas that're robbing Guatemala banks blind

I don't like K.G.B. Gulag concentration camps
I don't like the Maoists' Cambodian Death Dance
15 Million were killed by Stalin Secretary of Terror
He has killed our old Red Revolution for ever

I don't like Anarchists screaming Love is Free
I don't like the C.I.A. they killed John Kennedy
Paranoiac tanks sit in Prague and Hungary
But I don't like counterrevolution paid for by the C.I.A.

Tyranny in Turkey or Korea Nineteen Eighty
I don't like Right Wing Death Squad Democracy
Police State Iran Nicaragua yesterday
Laissez-faire please Government keep your secret police from me

I don't like Nationalist Supremacy White or Black
I don't like Narcs & Mafia marketing Smack
The General bullying Congress in his tweed vest
The President building up his Armies East and West

I don't like Argentine police assassinating Jews
Government Terrorist takeover Salvador news
I don't like Zionists acting Nazi Storm Troop
Palestine Liberation cooking Israel into Moslem soup

I don't like the Crown's Official Secrets Act
You can get away with murder in the Government that's a fact
Security cops teargassing radical kids
In Switzerland or Czechoslovakia God Forbids

In America it's Attica in Russia it's the Kremlin Wall
In China if you disappear you wouldn't know yourself at all
Arise Arise you citizens of the world use your lungs
Talk back to the Tyrants all they're afraid of is your tongues

Two hundred Billion dollars inflates World War
In United States every year They're asking for more
Russia's got as much in tanks and laser planes
Give or take Fifty Billion we can blow out everybody's brains

School's broke down 'cause history changes every night
Half the Free World nations are Dictatorships of the Right
The only place socialism works is in * * * * * * * * * bud
The Communist world's stuck together with prisoners' blood

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ALLEN GINSBERG

The Generals say they know something worth fighting for
They never say what till they start an unjust war
Iranian hostage Media Hysteria sucks
The Shah ran away with 9 Billion Iranian bucks

Col. Roosevelt and his U.S. dollars overthrew Mossadeq
They wanted his oil now they got Ayatollah's dreck
They put in the Shah and they trained his police the Savak
All Iran was our hostage quarter-century That's right Jack

Bishop Romero wrote President Carter to stop
Guns to El Salvador's Junta so he got shot
Ambassador White blew the whistle on the White House lies
Reagan called him home cause he looked in dead nuns' eyes

Half the voters didn't vote they knew it was too late
Newspaper headlines called it a big Mandate
Some people voted for Reagan eyes open wide
3 out of 4 didn't vote for him That's a Landslide

Truth may be hard to find but Falsehood's easy
Read between the lines our Imperialism is sleazy
If you think the People's State is your Heart's Desire
Jump right back in the frying pan from the fire

The System the System in Russia & China the same
Criticize the System in Budapest lose your name
Coca Cola Pepsi Cola in Russia & China come true
Khrushchev yelled in Hollywood "We will bury You"

America and Russia want to bomb themselves Okay
Everybody dead on both sides Everybody pray
All except the Generals in caves where they can hide
And fuck each other in the ass waiting for the next free ride

No hope Communism no hope Capitalism Yeah
Everybody's lying on both sides Nyeah nyeah nyeah
The bloody iron curtain of American Military Power
Is a mirror image of Russia's red Babel-Tower

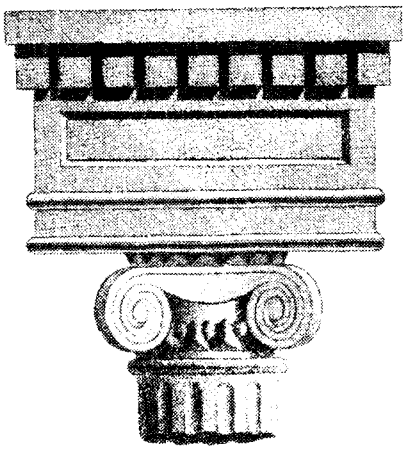
Jesus Christ was spotless but was Crucified by the Mob
Law & Order Herod's hired soldiers did the job
Flowerpower's fine but innocence has got no Protection
The man who shot John Lennon had a Hero-worshipper's connection

The moral of this song is that the world is in a horrible place
Scientific Industry devours the human race
Police in every country armed with Tear Gas & TV
Secret Masters everywhere bureaucratize for you & me

Terrorists and police together build an upperclass Rage
Propaganda murder manipulates the middleclass Stage
Can't tell the difference 'tween a turkey & a provocateur
If you're feeling confused the Government's in there for sure

Aware Aware wherever you are No Fear
Trust your heart Don't ride your Paranoia dear
Breathe together with an ordinary mind
Armed with Humor Feed & Help Enlighten Woe Mankind

Allen Ginsberg currently teaches poetics at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado.



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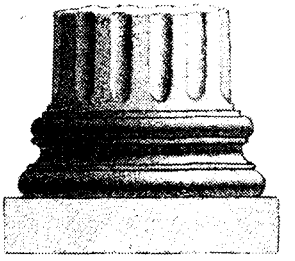

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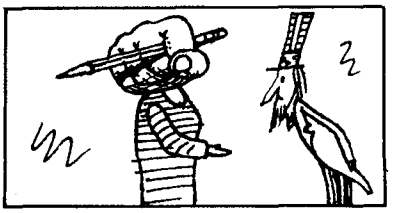

GET THEE A GRANT

Why Writers Must Play Politics

RONALD SUKENICK

What are the politics of government funding for literature? President Gerald Ford liked to say that government support means government control. Five or six years ago, I found myself, along with William Phillips, editor of the *Partisan Review*, in the office of Nancy Hanks, then head of the National Endowment for the Arts, arguing essentially that government support was indeed a threat, that too much influence was being exercised by "government-appointed bureaucrats" over the creative "community." Phillips and I were defending the principle of independent artists' organizations distributing grants rather than the government. The meeting was the culmination of a year-long fight against the complete and terminating cutoff in government funding for the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines (C.C.L.M.), of which Phillips was the founder and former chairman and I was chairman. Our tactics had included petition drives, letter-writing campaigns, lobbying and press coverage. The politics of the meeting with Hanks were that we had persuaded five sympathetic members of Congress who sat on the committees that fund the N.E.A. to send legislative assistants to Hanks's office to hear our case against the endowment. Our arguments prevailed.

Under President Jimmy Carter, it was important to be "grass roots." If you wanted to discredit someone's literary position, you called him an "elitist." A "government-appointed bureaucrat" wasn't so bad if he supported "grass roots." But more recently, when the Reagan Administration began deserting the grass roots in arts funding, the head of a certain writers' organization reportedly exclaimed, "Oh, my God, we haven't been elitist enough!" From which I conclude that the application of political labels to literary activities is rhetoric. Has, for example, the avant-garde been "rightist" or "leftist"? Ezra Pound or Louis Aragon? The point is that, beyond rhetoric, it is both legitimate and possible for organizations formed and controlled by artists to win a greater number of creative opportunities for their members by working at the political level.

Writers are citizens too. Of course, government support risks government control, but so does mass-market appeal risk mass-market control and industry backing risk industry control. And which of these areas is more open to public or lobbying influence? Our literary lonesome cowboys can grumble all they want about the corrupting influences of organizations, but the only real way to deal with institutions, whether public or private, is to have one's own. The more writers play the lonesome cowboy, the less we are citizens and the more we are beggars. There are those who like that scene—the wandering minstrel on the poetry circuit, the indulgent university patron, the iconoclastic outsider with the working wife. But good cowboy boots are pushing $150 a pair, and nobody asks how the Lone Ranger could have afforded his silver bullets. (Actually, his late parents owned a silver mine.) I'd settle for meaningful citizenship as a professional. As the man said, *organize*!

It's true that there are already several writers' organizations doing splendid work in their special fields—for example, the Authors Guild, P.E.N., CODA, Associated Writing Programs, Teachers and Writers, C.C.L.M. itself. But it's also true that only a tiny fraction of the serious writers in this country make a living at their profession, and that their writing is grossly underfunded from public sources in comparison with the other arts. (Literature is next to last in funding among New York State Council for the Arts programs with $825,000, although the need is estimated at between $2 million and $3 million. Compare this with museums, which get more than $5 million from the state council. N.E.A. literature programs rank fourth from the bottom with $4.8 million in funding, surpassing only programs like folk and design arts. Music, in comparison, receives $16 million in grants.) I have already suggested that it is nonsense to apply the usual political terminology to writing, but there is a serious political question involved here: Can ways be found to help sustain what it is no exaggeration to call our most effective medium for preserving, exploring and extending our cultural life? Will the highly individualized collection of voices that make up our national literature be submerged, by accident or design, in the general wash of mass media, consumerism and propaganda? It is generally agreed that the conglomerate-dominated publishing industry no longer has the will—the demise of the National Book Awards was symptomatic of this—to sustain much marginally profitable "serious" writing, despite valiant holding actions on the part of a handful of editors. It is worse than useless to complain about this; complaining only obscures the fact and prevents a remedy. Publishing, after all, is a business, and a business owes nobody any favors. While it is true that publishing is also a culture business, my impression is that today it depends less on cultural prestige than in the past, and more on efficient and powerful techniques of promotion and distribution and the huge revenues from subsidiary-rights sales. In any case, there is apparently a more rigorous attention to the bottom line in the industry than there was in the days when it was a relatively genteel business. The role of the book itself also seems to have changed. Instead of being a means of quasi-religious communion between author and audience, it has become a package with as little content as possible in order to communicate to the largest number of consumers reachable. As an important New York editor recently said, some sell shoes and others sell books—what's the difference?

Given this situation, the question is not whether there should be government support but how and how much. At present, it is either disingenuous or stupid to assert that good writing will find its audience, and that the audience will be a profitable one. There have always been good books that have not found profitable audiences as well as good books that were not even supposed to find profitable audiences. What happens to these books in a milieu in which the big presses don't want to

Ronald Sukenick lives in Colorado and is the publisher of American Book Review. *His latest novel is* Long Talking Bad Conditions Blues *(Fiction Collective).*

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publish many of them and the small and university presses can't afford to? We have to accept that the publication of serious writing, with a few happy exceptions, is becoming more and more a nonprofit industry. A growing number of publishers say a book must sell 10,000 copies to break even. How many serious readers of poetry are there in this country? Even if each of them bought a given volume, I'm not sure that sales would reach 10,000. Wallace Stevens's *Harmonium*, which contains some of the indisputably great poems of the century, sold about 300 copies when first published. And besides, who wants to publish a book that merely breaks even these days? When you stop serving that audience of between 300 and 10,000 readers, you surely cut out a huge proportion of the best fiction, nonfiction and poetry being written. Yet that audience is sizable and important, and it seems criminal, from a cultural point of view, that it should not be served—especially since outside the commercial sector of the industry, where the overhead is much lower, the break-even point is closer to 2,000 copies.

It is precisely here, in serious marginal publishing, that the government should step in with subsidy funding. To a certain extent it already has, but it has always done so with the implicit or explicit philosophy that such funding should be regarded as seed money and that the publishers or magazines must eventually make their own way by competing in the free market. I'm not so sure how free that market actually is, given that such publishers and publications do not have access to the immense sales and distribution networks of the industry. But that is not the point. The question is, What kinds of culture in this country merit government funding? Do we expect ballet, opera and museums to turn a profit? Or repertory theaters, or libraries, for that matter? All these require and receive an enormously higher level of funding from public and private sources than writing does. Exactly where the line should be drawn is a difficult matter, but a distinction must be maintained. Serious writing is not part of the entertainment industry. *Finnegans Wake* is not an entertainment; and if *War and Peace* is, it is something else as well. Art is as generically close to education as it is to entertainment. I would argue that the National Endowment for the Humanities should also support endangered arts insofar as they serve an educational function—in universities and university presses, for example.

Certainly, some presses that start off publishing unprofitable kinds of writing will eventually hold their own in the marketplace. Perhaps the best example is New Directions, which over the years published a number of serious writers and built up a commercially viable backlist as these writers' reputations grew—largely, of course, with the help of New Directions. That is not going to happen with the current level of public support. The average C.C.L.M. grant to a literary magazine is less than $2,000 per year—to those lucky enough to win one. That probably barely covers postage for all but the littlest of the little magazines. The most the National Endowment's Literature Program will give a nonprofit publishing company is $12,500—enough for perhaps three books. This kind of support may help these enterprises limp along, but it is certainly not going to solve their financial problems. It also exercises what amounts to a hidden critical function—the last thing we want from public support—by encouraging certain

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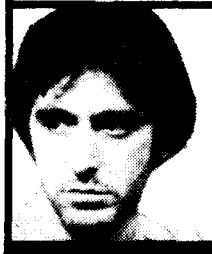

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forms of writing, particularly books of short poems, the shorter the better. It also insures that nobody can do anything very ambitious, that writers are not going to get paid very much and that professionalism will not be encouraged. It helps foster a system in which enterprises go bankrupt before any qualitative evolution can take place. It ghettoizes and stigmatizes the small presses—if not from a prestige point of view, at least from a commercial one. It further strengthens the literary class system in this country under which most writers make almost no money while a very few make a great deal.

Is it unthinkable that a serious writer who sells 10,000 copies of his book should make a modest living from his work? The chances are that such a writer will have a good library readership. Why not publicly subsidized library royalties of the kind that have been instituted in Australia, Sweden and Britain through the prodding of their writers' unions and organizations? Why shouldn't the government put up a few million dollars through the N.E.A. or some other institution—not a vast sum compared with what public radio and television get—to start a nonprofit publishing company that could both employ writers and have sufficient impact in the marketplace to be able to pay them adequately for their books? Why not a level of public funding that could support an august and historically important literary journal instead of the level we have now, which generally favors the small and the fly-by-night?

Writers' organizations attend to worthy causes ranging from helping poets in foreign prisons to employment for writers in the grammar schools, but none, so far as I know, deal in any consistent way with these bread-and-butter policy and fund-raising issues. If it seems quixotic in the present atmosphere of budget cutting to even talk about this sort of thing, I can only answer that it is important to develop some program, some vision, for literate writing in this country. Furthermore, the literary arts are so underfunded in the context of government spending that only a slight shift in priorities would be enough to generate substantial additional income. Conservatives are fond of saying that throwing money at problems won't solve them, but I know a lot of writers who could solve a lot of problems by having some money thrown at them. Stop throwing money at public television and see how long it lasts. Noncommercial writing has always been capital-starved, and you can't get a bank loan to publish a book of poetry. Give us the tools, as Winston Churchill said, and we will do the job.

It seems to me that most writers, rich or poor, are in the same boat. They may be making money on their latest book, but what about the next one? Poets never make any money to speak of on their work. A commercial novelist I know talks about poetry books in terms of "major sales to major markets"; he is living in a dream world. As for novelists, the prospects are more exciting. An author who is impoverished today may make a big movie sale tomorrow. After paying 50 percent of that to his publisher, 10 percent to his agent and 70 percent of the rest to the Internal Revenue Service, he may actually keep enough to live on for a couple of years. When it comes to financial security, I'd rather have just about any steady job. What if the next book is a failure and the publisher follows that unpleasant new trend of asking that the advance on royalties be returned—

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money the writer spent three years ago when he signed the contract? The conditions most writers in this country work under resemble those of a nineteenth-century cottage industry. The most rudimentary company union offers more benefits. Professors, at least, have tenure. There are countries, after all, whose governments offer a regular stipend to writers of merit, rather than dole out six months' support once or twice in a writer's lifetime, as does the N.E.A. If government aid creates the risk of government control, Grub Street conditions can engender servility and divisiveness.

At present, the industry is not interested in the ideas of writers who, in addition to being concerned with their own careers, are concerned that quality writing gets published. If writers have something to say, they are in no position to say it. It would be as if architects had nothing to say about what kinds of houses get built. Would it be unreasonable to consider public support for a program to publish a series of books chosen by writers, books of precisely the sort that publishers feel they cannot afford to publish?

It will be argued that if you make it too easy to be a writer, there will be a lowering of standards. It's hard for me to believe it is ever going to be easy to be an artist in America. Anybody who wants to make money or wants security is still going to become a lawyer or an engineer. And let us not sentimentalize noncommercial standards. Poor writers are not necessarily better writers. Rich writers do not have lower standards than poor ones. Most writers want money. Of course, anyone who equates commercial success with literary merit is not worth talking to. On the other hand, anyone who thinks that the noncommercial literary world is a pristine place where the values of Joyce and Beckett reign supreme is indulging some weird fantasy that must derive from guilt over commercial success or, more likely, starry innocence. It is a world filled with pretentious mediocrity, career politicking and, yes, commercial ambition. No doubt it was different in the days of Sylvia Beach. However, there is no question that the ratio of quality to schlock in noncommercial publishing is much higher than in the commercial sector. It is true that as government subsidy increases, the level of schlock rises, and I have seen it happen. But it is also true that the chance of something good being lost is decreased, and that seems to me the crucial goal.

It is impossible and, besides, undesirable for the government to subsidize "good" art. The government is in no position to set down criteria for good and bad art. The last thing we want public funding to do is impose literary standards. What the government should do when it subsidizes writing is provide the opportunity for writers, editors and critics to argue out those criteria in a context that will allow some practical consequence. It is precisely this dialogue that public funding should be supporting, rather than particular kinds of art or artists. That means funding artists' institutions where such discussions can take place, as well as funding artists.

It also means that writers need to create more institutions in which they can operate autonomously. The decision to publish a book is an important piece of practical criticism. Why should there not be more outlets, like Alice James's books and the Fiction Collective, or even more commercial organizations, through which writers, too, can independently express their tastes? The decision to send a book through a distribution network, or to stock it in a bookstore, can also be an exercise in critical taste. Why should such decisions be left completely to the commercial interests and their computers controlling the stock in hundreds of bookstores? Why should there not be some way, within the commercial system, for writers to play an important part in making these decisions? In France, and with more success in West Germany, writers have started their own bookstores. But in this country, once a book is published that might be of interest to the 10,000 literary readers, where are they going to find it? How many truly literate nonchain bookstores are left in the United States? A few hundred, perhaps? And those mostly located in a handful of big cities and on college campuses. And once those books are in the stores, or even available through the mail, how are readers to know that they exist and that they are worth reading? The mass-media book reviews are not set up to keep track of them, nor, probably, can they afford to. Government is in a position to subsidize these kinds of activities and institutions, and this support is what we have a right to expect from public funding. And the government, because of its representative nature, is also in a position to insure that such organizations are not dominated by the usual clique of insiders.

The writer in this country is often identified with the tradition of the outsider, of the frontier, of the lonesome cowboy. He is part of the myth in which the government is the enemy. Theoretically, at least, the government belongs to the people and is available for use by its citizens. Writers can generate a considerable amount of leverage in terms of publicity and lobbying. It is fine and even essential to try to influence, for example, copyright legislation, but at a time when the very status of writing seems to be undergoing drastic change, there may be broader issues at stake requiring broader kinds of organization. Why not a coalition of all the major writers' organizations in a writers' federation that might be able not only to encourage government funding but, equally important, to exert influence over it? Never mind invitations to dinner at the White House.

Work in literary organizations, in bureaucracies and in politics is dreary and corrosive. It is probably not worth getting into if you have anything more important to do, such as write. But if you don't do it, no doubt somebody else will, maybe even some ghoul who actually enjoys doing it, someone with culture-commissar potential, or culture czar, as the case may be. Without a certain amount of disinterested common effort, increased government funding might well be wasted in pork barrels and gravy trains, in the hands of culture cliques and literary operators. In that case, it might be better to do nothing. It is always important to remember that the real authority of artists, especially when there is no prospect for principled action, derives precisely from their lack of power. □

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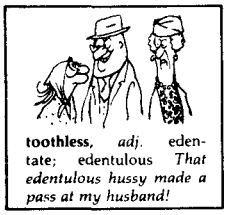
Illustrations by George Booth



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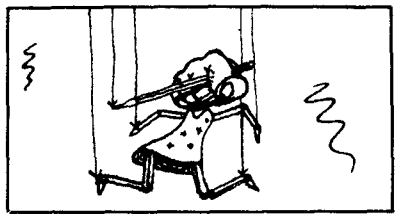

MORE THAN ACADEMIC

Oligopoly in the Idea Market

THOMAS FERGUSON AND JOEL ROGERS

Ever since the great revolutions of capitalism and the printing press, liberal political thought has insisted on the primacy of two related propositions in the construction of a just political order: writers on public policy should be free to describe the world as they see it, and their free discourse will assure the discovery of truth.

While occasionally defended as an end in itself, such freedom was usually championed as a means to the higher ends of civic enlightenment and democratic process. Through the interplay of argument, members of the commonweal would come to make more informed, more rational and finally *better* choices about the ordering of their lives and their government. In the American version of the theory, most famously expressed in the early First Amendment dissents of Oliver Wendell Holmes and Louis Brandeis, the structure of debate was likened to a free market. Ideas competed for attention. Those bought by the most people were assumed to be the best.

Only rarely did anyone worry that the market might be rigged. Given half a chance, the truth would out. As John Milton argued in his classic defense of a free press, the *Areopagitica*: "For who knows not that truth is strong, next to the Almighty? She needs no policies, nor stratagems, nor licensings to make her victorious; those are the shifts and defenses that error uses against her power. Give her but room . . ."

No matter that this lofty view of free debate and free writing was honored principally in the breech; it retained its hold. Liberal theory clung to the conception, both normatively and empirically, that is, as an account both of the way the political system and political commentary *ought* to work and the way they *did* work. Paradoxically, the claim is today made more stridently than ever, even as the foundations of liberalism crumble around us. This paradox is the expression, for writers and readers alike, of the changed character of the liberal state.

The great achievement of classical liberalism was to make plausible, for the first time in human history, a distinction between economic and political power. The state, at least in theory, was defined through a system of universal right that stood indifferent to the accidents of private power. Alongside the state stood the self-regulating market. Because of its foundations in consensual exchange, it too was just. The putative separation of political and economic power permitted the state to be defined as "minimal" but open. In this way, the autonomy of the market furnished the guarantee of political freedom.

But even in theory, the separation of economic and political power no longer exists. Widespread market failure has given rise, in this century, to the interventionist state. Routinely shaping, correcting, supplementing and selectively replacing the market mechanism, the interventionist state is explicitly committed to the task of economic decision making. But the expansion of state functions has not been accompanied by a comparably expanded system of popular participation in government. It has had, rather, the opposite effect: political decisions have been displaced to an administrative apparatus that is detached from popular control. This development has decisively affected political writing.

To the extent that important state actions are not determined democratically, their justification requires appeal to extrademocratic norms. Thus the executive-centered state's huge administrative apparatus is justified by the rationality of "scientific" policy analysis and the rule of "neutral" expertise. The renunciation of the democratic ideal and the creation of increasingly closed institutions is justified by a theory of "democratic elitism." Writers, policy analysts, social scientists are in heavy demand to generate popular assent to this form of state control. But in the formally democratic state, the increased bypassing of the democratic process gives rise to a corresponding need to conceal the undemocratic mechanisms actually at work.

An interesting situation results. On the one hand, political writing and policy analysis have become crucial to the maintenance of a specific system of power and are tied ever more closely to its defense. On the other hand, the maintenance of that specific system comes to depend on the appearance of independence in that writing.

And so on the eve of a conference called to consider the state of writing in America, we can ask a preliminary question about writings on the state. Why are the tensions between the popular conception of political writing and its newly powerful function so poorly understood? Why have the appearances of the liberal theory of writing as unstructured and unconstrained not given way before the realities of contemporary politics?

There is no lack of evidence, certainly, that the central role of policy analysis is organizing consent, or that prominent analysts have close ties to established sources of power. In recent years, a vast array of think tanks, research institutes, publishing concerns and foundations have sprung up, or reorganized, with the aim of influencing discussion of public policy. Together they subsidize literally thousands of "neutral" academics, journalists and "communications experts" hard at work mustering support for higher defense spending, dreaming up "worst-case" nuclear attack scenarios, "proving" the "inefficiency" of government regulation of business, "planning" for three, four, many possible theater wars. The voices of conservative policy analysts and political writers can be heard throughout the land. Their rich cadences justify the repeal of environmental and health legislation and cutbacks in social welfare expenditures and affirmative action plans while providing any number of arguments for still more

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regressive revisions of the tax system and regulatory policy, and the creation of what one leading business organization, the National Association of Manufacturers, delicately refers to as "a union-free environment."

Nor is there much subtlety in the demands that powerful business interests make on university scholarship. It would be difficult to be any blunter than William Simon and other business leaders have been when they declare their intention to tighten their control over financially pressed universities. And it would be impossible to be cruder than Du Pont, whose actions to suppress Gerard Zilg's brillant book *Du Pont: Behind the Nylon Curtain* are now the subject of litigation.

Nor can doubts remain that the "intellectuals" themselves have by now come to welcome their association with business power. In contrast to the widespread practice of only a few years ago, academics, at least in their *Who's Who* entries, increasingly include their corporate affiliations. And on the campaign trail, scholars increasingly appear together with business leaders. One of Ronald Reagan's major press releases during the postconvention campaign last summer illustrates the point. Along with the prominent business leaders whose support the candidate wished to announce, like Crocker National Bank's Laurence Silberman, Procter & Gamble's Bryce Harlow and Emerson Electric's Edwin Harper, were such influential social scientists as Edward Banfield, Milton Friedman, Herman Kahn, Irving Kristol and George Stigler.

And yet, the liberal idea of politics and writing persists. It is clear that most readers—and indeed most writers—of literature on American public policy continue to approach what they read and write with an almost angelic innocence. They persist in believing, as they ponder articles on policy "options," that all reasonable alternatives are represented, that all parties to the isssue have had a meaningful chance to press their cases, that all relevant evidence is being continuously assessed, that most experts are neutral (and that it is therefore surprising when the experts disagree).

Why then, despite all the countervailing evidence, do the liberal claims about the nature of political writing and pluralist reality remain intact? As with most mysteries of the American organism, the solution is as straightforward as it is depressing.

By far the most significant reason most people cling to the classical liberal conceptions of writing and public opinion is that they are seldom, if ever, offered a coherent contrary view of how policy analysis and political writing are structured. Here the practice of most American history and social science deserves special mention. Almost no major social scientist writes about the political organization of foundations, universities or even the business community itself in other than the most general terms. Students of American power ignore their own political function, and their sources of influence and support. The most prominent foreign policy analysts are silent about the role of the Council on Foreign Relations, to which most of them (at least until recently) belonged. Analysts of the American system do not discuss the broad political initiatives of the major foundations, such as the decades-long campaign for free trade and inter-

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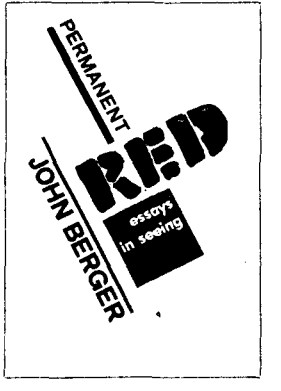

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nationalism waged by the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Twentieth Century Fund. Nor do they pause to consider the often spectacular interventions foundations have made in select arenas of U.S. domestic politics, such as the Ford Foundation's massive backing of the Fund for the Republic in the early 1950s. (The fund led an attack on the right, provoking a counterattack by Sun Oil's J. Howard Pugh and several members of Congress.)

Similarly, political science and history journals are full of articles analyzing roll calls, committee memberships and vote margins of members of Congress, but rarely do the major journals mention the policy-shaping roles of the American Enterprise Institute, the Business Roundtable, the National Association of Manufacturers, the Committee for Economic Development or the Business Council. Focusing as they do on the purely formal apparatuses of state power, they are blind to the extragovernmental sources of authority—especially business authority—within the American system. From this viewpoint, many of the real machinations of state elites are simply unintelligible. For example, the Nixon aides who reportedly considered a plan to firebomb the Brookings Institution, the famous liberal think tank, appear merely insane.

That is not to say that no work has been done in this area. E. Richard Brown's *Rockefeller Medicine Men* is an important study of the role of large foundations in wrecking the American health-care system. David Noble's *America By Design: Science, Technology and the Rise of Corporate Capitalism,* Carol Gruber's *Mars and Minerva: World War I and the Uses of Higher Learning in America* and Mary Furner's *Advocacy and Objectivity: A Crisis in the Professionalization of American Social Science, 1865-1905* are all detailed studies of the relations between business leaders, educational administrators and scholars. Laurence Shoup and William Minter's *Imperial Brain Trust* is an instructive work on the Council on Foreign Relations. And a recent collection edited by Robert Arnove, *Philanthropy and Cultural Imperialism: The Foundations at Home and Abroad,* contains fine studies by Edward Berman and Russell Marks, among others.

But while they are often excellent, these works have not received the publicity accorded more conventional scholarship. A populace that seldom hears of important foundations or their role in shaping public opinion cannot be expected to understand their contemporary importance in structuring the "unrestricted" flow of policy debate.

Closely related to the silence of most scholars on the role of foundations and business in shaping public policy and opinion are the reportorial practices of the mass media. These contribute to public misinformation simply by not reporting the context in which the formation and justification of American policy takes place. The Council on Foreign Relations, for example, brings many journalists and scholars together with leading representatives of business. At its meetings, a reporter can easily acquire a feel for what parts of the American business community support what policy initiatives—but the ground rules for attendance specify that nothing of what is said can be printed.

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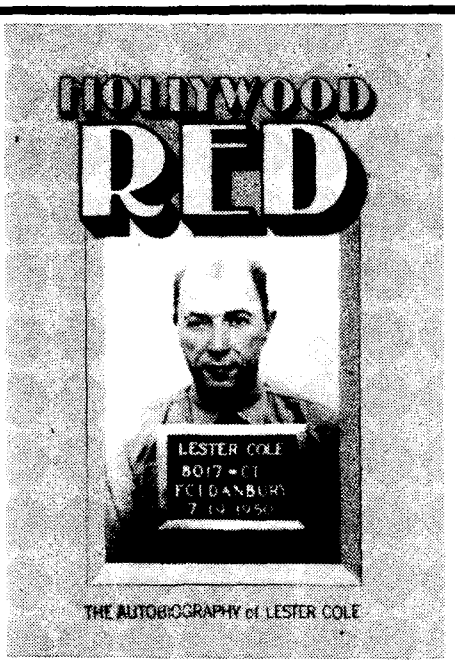

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THE AMERICAN BOOK REVIEW

altogether is the common media practice of not including crucial business affiliations in the identifications of leading commentators on politics and policy. An interesting example was a recent column by Paul MacAvoy that appeared in *The New York Times*. A frequent contributor to the op-ed page and the Sunday *Business and Finance* section of the paper, MacAvoy is customarily identified by *The Times* as Frederick William Beinecke Professor of Economics at Yale and a former member of President Gerald Ford's Council of Economic Advisers. A few weeks ago, one of MacAvoy's articles took the form of a mock memorandum to Vice President George Bush, whom MacAvoy (as *The Times* also noted) had advised during last year's Presidential campaign and who has, of course, been appointed the Administration's man in charge of dismantling much government regulation of business. The column suggested a number of wholly unsurprising initiatives to follow-up President Ronald Reagan's smashing budget victories. Included were suggestions to "dismantle" the Environmental Protection Agency, "reform" the Food and Drug Administration's licensing procedures to facilitate the quick marketing of new drugs, deregulate natural gas prices (making the sky or, more probably, a cartel-determined world price, their limit) and reduce sharply government supervision and regulation of financial markets. MacAvoy specifically urged the dismantling or severe modification of the Securities and Exchange Commission, calling it "the worst of the burden-creating agencies," and decrying as the "worst of its regulations" the S.E.C. rules on corporate disclosure of business activities and new stock issuance.

As usual, this advice came dressed in cooly neutral academic robes. From his Beinecke chair, MacAvoy appeared to readers as a concerned, but clearly independent, economist of impressive professional credentials. Unmentioned in the article or his identification was an important fact that might have affected the reader's evaluation of his suggestions, namely that MacAvoy serves on the board of at least one corporation with an obvious interest in several of his proposals—Amax, the mammoth raw materials producer—and only last year left the board of American Cyanamid, a major chemical concern.

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This was not an isolated case; the practice of omitting the business affiliations of an important writer is routine, and contributes significantly to public confusion. Consider, for example, Irving Kristol's writings on human-rights violations in Latin America, and his much publicized attack on Jacobo Timerman, the Argentine publisher whose revelations about his arrest and torture by government authorities raised grave questions about the wisdom of the Reagan Administration's policy toward "friendly" dictatorships around the world. Would readers have responded to Kristol's writing differently had he mentioned that he is a director of several large firms, including at least one, Warner-Lambert, which, according to *Moody's Industrial Manual*, a standard industry source, operates more than two dozen "significant" subsidiaries in Latin America, including at least three in Argentina itself? Or after Peter McClelland and Alan Magdovitz's highly critical study of Nelson Rockefeller (in their *Crisis in the Making: The Political Economy of New York State Since 1945*) had been savaged in *The New York Times* by a reviewer identified only as the author of a book on New York City finances, would the orders from booksellers have been higher if they had known that the reviewer worked as a vice president at Chase, the Rockefeller family bank?

These questions cannot be answered here. They serve merely to highlight some of the difficulties the nonspecialist reader might encounter in making his way through the reams of "independent" commentary that flood the marketplace of ideas. But it is worth noting that these are not the most egregious of the distortions or concealments of the close connections between important business interests and the main currents of political commentary. Nor do they begin to trace all the paths between prominent "neutral" actors in the public sphere and the hidden centers of private power.

Consider Harvard professor Martin Feldstein, who has perhaps done the most important work among established academics in shoring up whatever legitimacy the Reagan economic programs now claim. Incarnating the modern confluence of private power, institutionalized policy analysis, academic legitimacy and easy access to important journals of opinion, Feldstein is president of the National Bureau of Economic Research, that Acropolis of value-free social science, a director of the Hartford-based Phoenix Mutual Life Insurance Company and a member of the editorial board of the neoconservative *Public Interest*. Or Father Theodore Hesburgh, the enlightened churchman, who provides added twists in the golden thread connecting foundations, major universities and specific initiatives in public policy. Hesburgh, the president of Notre Dame, serves as well as a director of the Chase Manhattan Bank and a trustee of the Rockefeller Foundation. A member of countless "independent" study commissions on U.S. domestic politics, Hesburgh has recently drawn sharp criticism from Third World leaders for the role he played as chairman of the American delegation at U.N. meetings on technology transfer to the developing nations. Most readers of Feldstein's economic recommendations or Hesburgh's sermons on unequal development are surely unaware of their close ties to specific business interests. The list could go on and on.

But while widespread public ignorance of the affiliations of leading policy commentators may explain some of the resilience of the old notions about the nature of political writing, they surely do not explain it all. An important additional factor is the carefully nurtured fantasy most people have of the academy itself.

In part, this is a consequence of the defects in American historiography alluded to earlier. The same historians who rarely mention foundations rarely mention universities. As a consequence, the significant political roles played by such leading early educational administrators as Harvard presidents A. Lawrence Lowell (who campaigned ardently for the League of Nations, to the undisguised pleasure of his most affluent trustees) and Charles Eliot (who promoted "employee representation" schemes as a stop-gap measure to halt the spread of trade unions), or Stanford president Ray Lyman Wilbur (who served as Secretary of the Interior under his most famous alumnus, Herbert Hoover) are virtually unknown. As are the activities of their latter-day counterparts, or the historical stages of business-university interactions charted in the writings of David Noble, Carol Gruber and others. But more than history is lost. Since the overwhelming majority of writers on public policy and the state are currently housed in universities, misconceptions about the internal structure of university life and scholarship contribute to a misunderstanding of the production of political writing in general. And, since few nonacademics appreciate how stratified the contemporary system of university education is, they cannot evaluate the common claim, often amplified by business leaders like Simon, that the colleges are full of radical critics of capitalism. Misunderstood and misrepresented in all this is the degree to which money, media attention and access to the most prestigious journals are rigorously controlled. Though the picture varies somewhat by field—history and sociology, for example, are less rigidly hierarchical and professionally disciplined than either political science or economics—leading journals in the humanities and social sciences contain very few articles critical, even by implication, of business.

Contributing to the mystery are special problems of interpretation posed by the most important direct links between the academy and business—sponsored research by foundations and outside think tanks. Almost no one, for example, analyzes the way foundation programs are actually put together or achieve their results. A particular isolated piece of research is less important than a foundation's overall program. Most discussions of the subject consist almost wholly of foundation spokesmen congratulating themselves on the pluralism evident in their funding of an occasional liberal or, more rarely, "radical" researcher (often for quite intelligible reasons of their own), and thereby avoiding public scrutiny of the overwhelmingly stifling purposes to which their money is applied.

Outside the academic and foundation world, the commercially based "free market" of ideas is increasingly oligopolistic. There is a probusiness consensus that is ratified by the handful of important journals of national opinion. Operating within a fairly well-defined set of expectations of governments and private power, these effectively succeed in drawing tight limits to the field of acceptable commentary. For all intents and purposes, the United States has no opposition press—no major organ of national opinion that calls for a radical transformation of the status quo. Instead, as in any oligopolis-

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tic structure, the competition of ideas and commentary is limited to the marginal differentiation of near-identical products.

A final condition obscuring the business-writing nexus is the smokescreen of false issues, which serves to prevent any truly critical grasp of the subject. Many commentators, for example, focus on the motives of individual writers and their patrons. While sometimes interesting, such inquiries direct attention away from the politically more important questions of how the policy-analysis community as a whole figures in the implementation of one or another political initiative, and why the position of groups within that community changes over time. Put otherwise, why do we hear from so many albeit sincere people arguing from one particular side of a policy issue at any given time? What is the context of their message?

Equally irrelevant is the frequent claim that tracing the business sponsors of a particular policy program amounts to practicing guilt by association or McCarthyite witch-hunting. Presenting evidence that particular programs serve the interests of the business community (or any other group) and are being sponsored or subsidized is not an accusation of treason or fellow-traveling with the Red—or any other—Menace. Nor is "guilt" being inferred from "association." As with individual motives, the task of the analysis is to specify a structure of strategic interdependence between political actors, not to pass judgment on their moral character.

Last but not least, many researchers who have explored the links between corporate America and research and writing have employed a crude "spider web" theory of control between actors. They trace A's link to B, and B's to C, and so on down the line through D, E, F and the rest. Then they stop, drawing the sweeping conclusion that all these people automatically are in basic agreement—that they constitute one powerful network of actors that operates with unified strategy and force. There are situations where such proceedings are appropriate. More often, however, the network analysis is done largely without reference to the institutions and processes that make up the political economy of the actors under scrutiny. Abstracted in this manner, such discussions quickly lose track of their object. The network itself becomes the explanation for strategically coordinated action, rather than a guide to an explanation. The results lend themselves to caricature, especially when they are treated statically.

Whatever the defects of revisionist interpretation, however, it has the singular merit of seeing, as many do not, how radically different the present situation is from Milton's time. As we move from the foundation of our heritage to the Heritage Foundation, from the ideal of writing in the open society to the highly structured reality of a new form of political power, this elemental point bears exploration. The functions of the writer on public policy in America are limited, as are those of any actor, by the constraints that bind the political system through which he moves. But for far too long, the political writer has carried the additional burden of an illusory independence from that system. Like the system itself, he (or, more rarely, she) has remained prototypically liberal in self-conception, but illiberal in practice, fully dominated by private interests at the moment he announces his independence. Abandoning the illusion of independence is now as necessary as it will be painful, but paradise is finally, irretrievably, lost, and is not about to be regained. The writer can either learn a new role in a radically restructured political realm or remain in an imaginary world. The first course holds out the prospect that forceful political commentary may once again appear on the American scene.

But it is the second course that has been more widely chosen. Here the liberal ideal of autonomy is preserved, but drained of content. The writer goes through the motions of his trade, but does not achieve its truthful object. Like the literary critic described by Balzac in *A Harlot High and Low*, he continues, but with dissipated purpose. He "has read too many books, forgotten so many, is so accustomed to written pages, has watched so many plots unfold, witnessed so many dramatic climaxes, he has produced so many articles without saying what he really thought, so often betraying art to serve his friendships and his enmities, that in the end he views everything with distaste and continues nevertheless to judge." □

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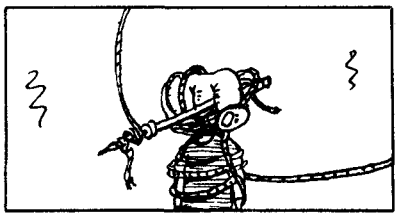

WRITERS' RIGHTS

The Legal Mine Field

JOEL M. GORA

The phone number of a good lawyer is not something a writer should ordinarily need—a good agent or an acquisitive editor is more like it. But then these are not ordinary times. More than ever before, the writer's needs and the law's requirements intersect. As a result, legal and constitutional issues now have an unparalleled impact on writing and creativity.

If writers and their lawyers sought to fashion a few basic principles specifically designed to ease the writer's ability to inquire, create and publish, they would readily come up with the following. First, writers should have access to whatever information they need that pertains to their work. Second, writers should be free to publish their work without prior restraint. Third, writers should not be threatened with or subjected to official or private sanctions because of what they have written. Fourth, writers should be confident that their work will reach its intended audience without the erection of official or private barriers. Presumably, writers would also want guaranteed advances, royalties and readers, but such rights are beyond the law's command.

Let us look at the law as it relates to the writer in the real world. How close does it come to measuring up to these ideals?

Access to information. Over the last decade, authors and journalists have, with increasing boldness, asserted that under the First Amendment's protections of freedom of speech, press, assembly and inquiry, they have a special right of access to information about government. But in cases in which journalists have demanded admission to prisons, the Supreme Court has rejected the contention that "the Constitution imposes upon government the affirmative duty to make available to journalists sources of information not available to members of the public generally." This rejection was tempered slightly in a more recent case in which the Court ruled that the public and the press could not be summarily and arbitrarily excluded from a murder trial. In reaching that result, the Court pointed to a constitutional "right to gather information" and recognized a "right of access to places traditionally open to the public [such] as criminal trials. . . ." Indeed, Justice John Paul Stevens heralded the decision as "a watershed case," establishing that "an arbitrary interference with access to important information is an abridgement of the freedoms of speech and of the press. . . ." But it seems likely that the ruling will apply only to criminal trials, which are traditionally open and public. Writers seeking information about and from the government will have to continue to rely on legislative grace in the form of freedom of information laws rather than on constitutional right.

Prior Restraint. Deeply etched in Anglo-American legal traditions, the rule against "previous restraints upon publication" has discouraged official efforts to suppress a book or a story before it sees the light of day. But in the landmark Pentagon Papers case a decade ago, the only thing that the six Justices in the majority could agree on in their brief opinion was that the Federal government, in seeking to restrain the publication of those articles and documents, had failed to meet its "heavy burden of showing justification for the enforcement of such a restraint." Only Justices Hugo Black and William O. Douglas argued that the government could never make such a case. Most of the Justices were willing at least to postulate some situation in which such a restraint might be contemplated. And in countless symposia and colloquia following the Court's decision, the hypothetical "hard" case was always put: "If someone were about to publish the secret of the H-Bomb, wouldn't a prior restraint be permissible?" Given life's penchant for imitating art, it was surely no surprise when the government obtained a preliminary injunction stopping *The Progressive* from publishing Howard Morland's article, "The H-Bomb Secret: To Know How Is to Ask Why." It was only the government's own ineptness that caused the case to collapse, thereby avoiding a test of principle. Even the most ardent First Amendment partisans could be forgiven a sigh of relief that the matter ended with the proverbial whimper rather than with a constitutional clash, whose favorable outcome was far from certain.

Subsequent Punishment. While prior restraint on publication is presumed invalid, the law has always permitted writers to be punished after the fact if the courts find that their work falls within a number of "unprotected" categories of expression. For example, speech or writing that is libelous, that is an invasion of privacy, that infringes on copyrights, that is pornographic or that violates criminal statutes is not protected. The penalty may take the form of either criminal punishment or monetary damages, the mere contemplation of which can chill all but the boldest among us.

Barriers to Communication. Even the writer whose work has cleared or avoided these legal obstacles must still confront the forces of ignorance and censorship. Ultimately, of course, writers need readers more than they need anything else. And that is where the repression of thought associated with the Moral Majority has its most pernicious impact. Teachers, librarians, school board members, bookstore managers, newsstand operators—all are bearing the brunt of the New Censorship. Only the foolhardy or the stouthearted can resist such pressures, and the law offers little help to those who try.

Consider the major legal trouble spots confronting writers today. In the realm of government secrecy, formidable barriers to the gathering and publishing of information have been erected. The Freedom of Information Act is an important weapon against government secrecy, but its provisions exempt from disclosure a wide range of information relating to national security matters, law enforcement activities, personnel rules and practices in government agencies, investigatory records and information subject to legal privilege. Numerous claims of these exemptions by government officials have spawned extensive litigation under the

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Terror-ism Made in America

DEATH IN WASHINGTON by Donald Freed and Fred Landis accuses top U.S. officials, journalists and politicians of attempting to cover up the assassination of Orlando Letelier, Chilean diplomat, and American, Ronni Moffett. The authors reveal how the C.I.A. instigated the overthrow of the democratically elected government of Chile and the murder of President Salvador Allende. They charge that **GEORGE BUSH** and **GENERAL VERNON WALTERS,** deputy director of the C.I.A., with full knowledge of the facts, attempted to whitewash the role of the Chilean junta in the Letelier assassination. Both men had advance knowledge of impending terrorism *before* the Letelier murder, as did **HENRY KISSINGER.** **MICHAEL VERNON TOWNLEY,** convicted of leading the assassination team, was a covert agent of the C.I.A. and trained by them in the use of explosives. **WILLIAM BUCKLEY,** as an undercover asset of the C.I.A., set up a *PR mechanism* used to cover up terror in Chile and abroad after the 1973 coup. His brother, former **SENATOR JAMES BUCKLEY,** had close links with Michael Townley and members of the terrorist group 'Omega 7' involved in the assassination of Letelier and Moffett. **ALEXANDER HAIG,** Kissinger aide, took part in the 'Track I' planning to prevent democratic elections in Chile, and to murder Chilean Chief-of-Staff General Rene Schneider. **DEANE HINTON,** the new ambassador to El Salvador, was part of the covert coup team in Chile as he had been before in Guatemala. Hinton, a long time C.I.A. asset, was, with Haig, an aide to Kissinger, during the planning of the coup in 1973. These are only a few of the prominent North Americans—linked by the authors to the campaign of terror against the Allende regime and now supporting the El Salvador junta responsible for a reign of terror in that country—named in **DEATH IN WASHINGTON.**

"The authors . . . raise a number of serious questions that deserve explanations from those charged . . . Recommended."
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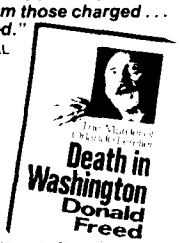

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DAVID ATLEE PHILLIPS v. DONALD FREED, et al.

Author Donald Freed, attorney William Pepper, political scientist Fred Landis, teacher Patricia Freed and several others are being sued by former Senior Officers of the Central Intelligence Agency for $90 million. A group of retired spies called the Association of Former Intelligence Officers, founded by David Atlee Phillips in 1975, has raised a "war chest" to finance the suit against Freed, hoping it will serve as a test case to deter other writers or critics of the C.I.A. from making "absurd charges."

As Charles Morgan said in a Pacifica radio news essay:

> . . . *Death in Washington* . . . is a thoroughly researched, apparently deeply documented work, tightly, one might say tautly, drawn. It is clearly written, in some places poetic. . . . Unhappily, it is not fiction. It is a damning indictment of fact . . .
>
> More than a ridiculous demand for $30 million in compensatory and punitive damages on each of three counts is at stake here. . . . The private suit of David Atlee Phillips is an ominous straw in a chilly wind against which our faces must be turned as we scrub away at devious plots and plans.

Former United States Attorney General RAMSEY CLARK and the noted civil liberties advocate MEL WULF have agreed to be chief counsels in the defense and countersuit of Freed. They do so at a time when the Reagan Administration is attempting to eradicate restraints on the C.I.A. and the F.B.I., and to render useless the Freedom of Information Act. Again quoting Morgan, "Add to this the prospect of suits, individual and class actions, to stifle further voices that dissent to police state organizations and their activities. Nineteen eighty-one counts down to 1984."

The "et al." in the case caption includes many others as yet unnamed. But we are *all* the et al., for censorship reaches into every home in the land when it reaches just one. The costs of preparing a defense against such charges could mount into the six-figure range, despite the generously donated labor of several attorneys. But it would cost far more to ignore it.

"This attempt to silence critical voices like that of Donald Freed's is very serious. They are not playing games. . . . This is the way it starts—think of Germany, think of Chile . . ."

Ramsey Clark

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act, and the courts have not been uniformly hospitable to the law's broad antisecrecy intentions. Henry Kissinger was able to frustrate reporters' efforts under the act to obtain transcripts of his telephone conversations as Secretary of State simply by taking the transcripts with him when he left office, a stratagem the Supreme Court upheld.

Things are likely to get worse, not better, as a result of the policy announced by the Reagan Administration of vigorously defending most F.O.I.A. suits brought against agencies that withhold documents. Similarly, President Reagan wants to ease the regulations restricting government's ability to classify information that were issued during the Carter Administration.

Another potential antidote to government secrecy are the so-called "sunshine" laws, designed to open official meetings and proceedings to public view. But these laws contain loopholes similar to those in the F.O.I.A., and there is little evidence that they are being used effectively by writers or other citizens.

Of course, one cannot speak of censorship and government secrecy without mention of three former Central Intelligence Agency officers-turned-authors, Victor Marchetti, Philip Agee and Frank Snepp. Marchetti, whose book with John Marks, *The C.I.A. and the Cult of Intelligence*, brought the initial court challenge to the C.I.A. secrecy agreements, became the first author in memory to have his book subjected to a judicially approved prior restraint that compelled him to delete large portions at the direction of the C.I.A. [see Aryeh Neier, "The C.I.A. as Censor," *The Nation*, May 24, 1980]. Agee, whose writings and activities have nettled the agency for years, recently lost a landmark case before the Supreme Court in which the Court held that the Secretary of State was empowered, by legislative acquiescence, to revoke his passport [see Stephen Gillers, "Reasoning Not the Need," *The Nation*, July 25-August 1]. The Court permitted this infringement on Agee's right to travel on the ground that his activities "are causing or are likely to cause serious damage to the national security or foreign policy of the United States." In response to Agee's contention that the revocation of his passport violated his First Amendment rights, Chief Justice Warren Burger observed:

> Agee's disclosures, among other things, have the declared purpose of obstructing intelligence operations and the recruiting of intelligence personnel. They are clearly not protected by the Constitution. The mere fact that Agee is also engaged in criticism of the Government does not render his conduct beyond the reach of the law.

Finally, there is Frank Snepp, who avoided Marchetti's fate by publishing his book, *Decent Interval*, without first submitting the manuscript to the C.I.A. Following publication, the Federal government took Snepp to court and obtained an injunction against future breaches of the secrecy agreements, thus placing him under a court order to submit all future writings to the C.I.A. for approval. Not content with prior restraint, and perhaps seeking to set an example for future whistle blowers, the government also sought monetary damages for breach of contract and the unprecedented imposition of what it called "a constructive trust" on the profits of the book. (Recent reports that the government plans to bring a secrecy suit against former Director of Central Intelligence William Colby are a comfort only to those who place a premium on irony.)

An amenable Federal judge granted the government all it asked for, but that was too much for even a conservative appeals court, which invalidated the constructive trust because the government had conceded that *Decent Interval* contained no classified information. The most hardened Supreme Court observers were startled when the Court, without full briefing and argument, summarily reimposed the trust on the ground that the critical harm to the government was caused not by the contents of the book but by the very fact of its having been published without the opportunity for prior official censorship. Reading the unsigned opinion, one senses that the Court viewed Snepp not as the author of a book about government misconduct but as a faithless employee. The Court's treatment of Snepp is a far cry from Justice Black's observations in the Pentagon Papers case:

> The press was protected . . . so that it could bare the secrets of government and inform the people. Only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in government. . . . In my view, far from deserving condemnation for their courageous reporting, the New York Times, the Washington Post and other newspapers should be commended for serving the purpose that the Founding Fathers saw so clearly.

While many writers are affected by government secrecy generally, few face the extraordinary threat of prior restraint. Most writers are, however, haunted by the specter of a libel suit for what they have written. Indeed, in recent years, the libel sanction has become an extremely potent weapon [see Eve Pell, "Libel as a Political Weapon," *The Nation*, June 6].

In the last decade, there has been a palpable shrinking of constitutional protection against defamation suits. In *New York Times Co.* v. *Sullivan*, a landmark 1964 ruling, the Supreme Court held that a "public official" who had been libeled could not collect damages unless the press had published the defamatory untruth with "actual malice." That principle was later expanded to protect writers and publications against such suits by "public figures" and even by otherwise private individuals involved in an issue of public interest. In 1974, however, the Court's retreat began, with a ruling that the safeguard of the "actual malice" requirement would be available only in suits brought by "public" people. As to "private" individuals, the Court cleared the way for holding writers responsible for defamatory remarks even when they were the result of simple negligence. The Court did put some limits on damage awards, but only when no proof of injury was introduced. Since 1974, several Supreme Court rulings have chipped away at the public-figure defense by narrowing the definition of the term. Thus, a noted liberal attorney, a prominent Florida socialite whose retinue included a press agent, a well-known academic who was the recipient of government research contracts and a person cited for contempt in connection with a grand jury investigation of Soviet espionage were all held not to be public figures.

Predictably, one result of these rulings has been a wave of libel judgments and settlements, including Carol Burnett's verdict against *The National Enquirer*, baseball player Steve Garvey's settlement with *Inside Sports* magazine and a judgment against author Gwen Davis, who was sued by a psychologist claiming he had been libelously portrayed as a character in a novel she had written. This last ruling, of course, threatens the entire genre of the *roman à clef*. Perhaps even more important, these rulings and results

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have a daily impact in the publishing world, where editorial decisions must be made with an eye to the legal ramifications of every sentence.

Writers are also hampered by the law's refusal to accord broad constitutional recognition of the need to protect confidential sources of information. In its 1972 *Branzburg* ruling, the Court was simply not convinced of the critical role of confidential sources. Although journalists have persuaded some lower courts and some state legislatures of the need for protecting their informants, there is still no Federal "shield" law, and hundreds of reporters have been threatened with contempt of court or other penalties for refusing to divulge their sources. To be sure, the claim of source protection may occasionally—and embarrassingly—prove to be a cover for ineptitude or indiscretion, but the vast majority of investigative stories could not be written without the assurance of confidentiality. The kind of evidentiary "privilege" which the law has recognized in a wide range of settings—executive privilege, attorney-client privilege, law enforcement informant privilege—has been denied to journalists.

Finally, the writer who has successfully navigated these shoals must still combat the growing forces of local censorship. Whether it be the removal of *Playboy* or *Penthouse* from a newsstand, the removal of *Slaughterhouse Five* or *Catch-22* from a school library or curriculum, the rejection of textbooks as too "progressive" or the requirement that they treat subjects such as evolution and "creationism" in a prescribed manner, there are powerful local pressures to replace "bad" ideas with "good" ones. According to one recent account, there have been incidents of censorship in more than 1,200 communities in the past year. Although such efforts are anathema to the spirit of free thought, inquiry and expression embodied in the First Amendment, the law has not supplied an effective remedy. When censorship takes the form of pressure by private groups, such as campaigns against bookstores, the law—properly so—protects the right of those groups to urge their views, no matter how heavy-handed and narrow-minded they are. But the only constitutionally permissible remedy against book burning—namely, public enlightenment—is too slow to be very effective. Even where the censorship is officially sponsored—through the decisions of school

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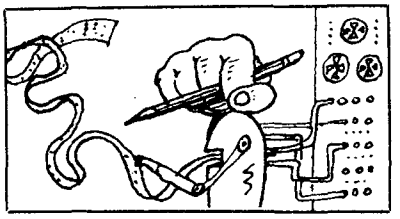
boards, librarians and legislative bodies—the courts have been slow to intervene and reluctant to second-guess "educational" decisions unless the censorship intent is transparent. And the law has no remedy at all for the silent cutting and trimming of content that occurs in editorial offices as a response to such local pressures.

Why has the law failed to grant to writers the rights that the purposes of the First Amendment would seem to require? I would suggest two possible answers.

First, the public infatuation with journalists, journalism and press freedom associated with the Watergate era has waned. Indeed, the public seems intolerant of anyone who challenges the status quo. The country, hardened by economic difficulties and wearied of a host of groups asserting their rights, has taken a turn toward tradition, order and stability. In that atmosphere, it should not be surprising that the vindication of First Amendment rights—premised as they are on the values served by the conflict and clash of ideas, individuals and institutions—should face tough sledding.

But the blame cannot wholly be placed on "the tenor of the times." The second reason writers have not been accorded the rights they claim is that the countervailing interests with which writers must do legal battle are by no means trifling or contrived. At their core, these interests reflect powerful individual and societal concerns. Excessive government secrecy and censorship are deplorable, but there are some secrets government is probably entitled to protect. Prohibitions on pornography may be highly objectionable, but the views of those who find it deeply offensive, or linked to crime and neighborhood decay, must also be taken into account [see Wendy Kaminer, "A Woman's Guide to Pornography and the Law," *The Nation*, June 21, 1980]. Finally, libel laws can be a dangerous weapon of censorship and repression, but they flow from concerns for individual reputation and human dignity.

Any strategy for asserting rights in the future, therefore, must take into account the hostile climate in which those rights must do battle and the weighty opposing interests that must be overcome. Only when the potency of those interests is recognized and respected can the battle to establish the primacy of First Amendment rights effectively go forward. □



PROCESSED WORDS

Plugging In to the New Technology

RALPH LEE SMITH

The accelerated pace of the communications revolution is dramatically changing the patterns of information dissemination. They haven't discovered a way to replace writers by machines—yet. But between the creative spark and the reader's shock of recognition lies a host of new technologies. The effects they will have on the writing profession are only beginning to be explored, and the writer who is not aware of them risks obsolescence. Some writers will make the transition from typewriters to word-processing equipment. Even more important, most writers will find themselves dealing with publishers who are availing themselves of the new technologies. Finally, new mediums of publication raise a host of subsidiary-rights questions, directly affecting the writer's income.

The changes engendered by this new technology include a rising tide of nationwide and worldwide data communications; an ever-greater resort to the storage of information and data in computers rather than in books; an increasing access to computerized information by a growing and increasingly diverse number of users; a dramatic jump in the quantity and variety of new video material available on cable, videocassette and videodisc; a decreasing cost of hardware and transmission, and a mounting flow of hardware and software into the home.

The actual production and dissemination of written material will increasingly involve computers and electronic transmission rather than magazines, books and periodicals. It seems hard to disagree with such authorities as Edgar A. Sack, a senior vice president of the General Instrument Corporation, who says that the new communications systems will revolutionize the American publishing industry.

The new technologies may be just in time to benefit small-circulation magazines. Because of the rising costs of the paper-and-ink format, many such publications may be unable to survive in their current form in the coming years.

Suppose, however, that a magazine like *The Nation* were to put the entire contents of each issue into a computerized data bank. Suppose, further, that anyone in the United States could have access to that data bank, either at home or at a library. The net results would probably be an increase in both regular subscribers of the magazine and readers of individual articles and a decrease in *The Nation*'s costs. Can such a thing be done? Not only can it be done but it is already being done.

There already exist numerous data banks in the United States to which institutional or individual users can have access on a subscription basis. Some, like LEXIS, the legal data base, and NEXIS, the professional information data base, are primarily designed for specialized groups of users. The contents of certain specialized magazines and periodicals are already being fed into NEXIS. Other data banks, like The Source and CompuServe, are accessible to the general public and contain information of interest to virtually everyone. An indication of the widespread appeal and usage that these data banks are expected to have is evident from *Reader's Digest*'s recent purchase of an 80 percent interest in The Source.

Once information has been stored in one of these data banks, access will become easy. To use The Source or CompuServe, one simply purchases a home computer, pays a subscription fee to the data bank and hooks oneself up to the great information effluvia via ordinary telephone lines. The user pays hourly rates to receive the material, which appears, electronic page by electronic page, on the cathode ray screen of one's computer in response to typed-in requests and code words.

Most people have no idea how commonplace this kind of activity is becom-

Ralph Lee Smith is vice president of The Bertman Group, Inc., a telecommunications consulting firm in Vienna, Virginia, and author of The Wired Nation *(Harper & Row).*

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ing. Home computers of great capability and flexibility now cost between $1,000 and $2,000. More than a million of them have been sold to business and individual users. The Source and CompuServe already have more than 10,000 subscribers each, and there is little doubt that these numbers will rise astronomically in the next few years. Printers that can be tied in with home computers, giving the user the option of having a printed copy to read from, are coming down in price.

Two other systems, known as teletext and videotex, are well past the starting point in Britain, Germany, Sweden and Canada, and both are now being tested in the United States. Teletext is a one-way form of communication that can be transmitted by conventional over-the-air broadcasting, satellite facilities and by cable TV systems. Several hundred individual frames of information are continuously transmitted round-robin fashion, so that the entire sequence is repeated every few seconds. The frames of information are accommodated on a portion of the standard television signal called the vertical blanking interval, which is normally invisible; every TV channel can receive a teletext round-robin in addition to a regular TV picture. The home viewer, using a device with numbered buttons like a Touch-Tone telephone, selects the individual frame or frames of information that he wishes to see by pushing the appropriate numbers. If he wants the weather report, say, he pushes 974; the TV picture on his screen promptly disappears and is replaced by picture frame 974.

Videotex is an interactive technology. Instead of intercepting frames of information that are being transmitted over his TV channels in continuous cycles, the videotex user summons to his screen frames of information that are stored in a computer. To do this, he transmits the appropriate questions to the computer, stating what he wants, and the computer responds by sending him the information. In contrast to teletext, which is limited by the number of frames that can be stored and transmitted in a round-robin fashion, and which has the added inconvenience of a possible time lag of six, twelve or more seconds —depending upon the number of frames in the particular system—before the requested picture comes up in the cycle, the videotex system can store and retrieve an almost unlimited amount of information.

The proprietors of videotex data banks operate differently from the proprietors of data banks like The Source or CompuServe. The latter resemble a traditional magazine. That is, their contents are selected by editors with the idea of creating the most attractive possible package of materials for potential users. The copyright owners of the materials are paid for their use.

In contrast, a videotex system such as Britain's Prestel simply rents space in its computer bank to any parties who have something to offer to the public. These renters either supply their material free or charge users by the page. Fees run from 5 cents to $1, depending on whether the owner of the material merely seeks exposure or is out to make a profit. Prestel now has about 10,000 users in Britain; some 150 organizations and owners of material rent space, providing more than 157,000 pages of text and pictorial information. (For those who see the new technologies as bringing about an educational millennium, it should be noted that the Prestel category most requested by subscribers is astrology.)

Because videotex is a two-way technology, it cannot employ standard means of broadcast transmission. Telephone lines can carry the subscribers' requests to the computer; so can local TV stations that transmit via cable or use satellite relay to pick up signals from a distance. Material from the computer is carried to the subscriber by the same means.

Computers and data banks make self-publication simple. All one has to do is rent space in a computer and program one's magnum opus. Viewers can then call up the text on their home screens and read it, adding, if they wish, their

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reactions, which will be preserved in the computer along with the original work. Still others can read the original work and the accompanying comments, and add their remarks to the ongoing dialogue. After a few days, the author can call up his own text plus the "reviews," and decide whether or not he wishes to revise what he has written, chastise his critics or just savor his notoriety.

There is no reason to believe that this rather remarkable scenario will not become a reality. Computer self-publication has special value for writers who wish to reduce errors by having the benefit of outsiders' opinions before their creation is finally fixed in printed form. On the other hand, it may greatly reduce the liveliness of letters to the editor columns. The attacks, ripostes and ventings of spleen will take place ahead of publication, electronically; and may be erased before the printed version is released.

A host of philosophical, political and moral problems surround the advent of these new technologies. This is not the place to explore them, although they undoubtedly will rank high on any policy agenda over the next decade. Some of the more immediate issues are listed below.

(*1*) How will authors be compensated in the new world of electronically transmitted magazine articles and books? When technology makes it possible to record every use, should authors get a royalty payment for each one? What should be done about the capability of home printers to create permanent hard copy of anything that is summoned to the screen? How will copyright be handled and protected?

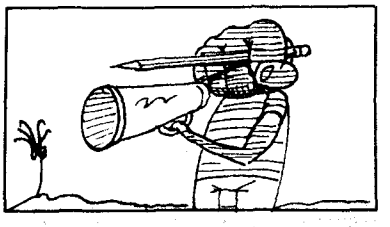
(*2*) When teletext, which is basically an informational medium in the form of words on a screen, is transmitted as part of an over-the-air broadcast signal, do the fairness doctrine, the equal-time doctrine and the panoply of other Federal regulations pertaining to broadcast television apply? Does an intermediary recipient, such as a cable system, have a right to separate the teletext signal from the broadcast signal and transmit only one or the other to its subscribers?

(*3*) As more and more articles and books become available only in data banks and videotex, will the cost of access create a sharper division between informational haves and have-nots in our society?

(*4*) The cable systems that will be built in major cities in the 1980s hold the key to large portions of the population's access to such services as electronic publishing, teletext and videotex. Yet the National Cable Television Association has mounted an intensive lobbying effort on Capitol Hill against mandatory access requirements, arguing that a cable system is "an electronic newspaper," whose content cannot be controlled or specified by any government entity. How can access to cable systems be arranged and guaranteed?

(*5*) In videotex systems, the computer must know who has asked to see what materials in order to transmit them to the correct recipient. Technologically, nothing prevents the computer from storing this information, and nothing prevents its being sold for commercial purposes, or its being used by law enforcement authorities. This raises immense issues of privacy that must be addressed.

Some of these problems are already under consideration by the Federal Communications Commission and the courts, but no national policy has even begun to be formulated. Richard M. Neustadt, associate director of the White House domestic policy staff under President Jimmy Carter, Gregg P. Skall, former general counsel of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, and Michael Hammer, associate chief counsel for broadcasting and cable at N.T.I.A., have written a paper entitled "The Regulation of Electronic Publishing," which they have circulated to the press. The paper, which is scheduled to appear in an upcoming issue of the *Federal Communications Law Journal*, discusses a number of the problems and offers thoughtful comments; it is recommended reading for anyone interested in the implications of the new information technology. Right now, no one knows all the answers—or even all the questions. In terms of communications, the opening years of the 1980s are truly the dawn of a new age. □



LOST READERS

Affirmative Actions For Black Writers

E. ETHELBERT MILLER

As far as an audience is concerned, black writers can take nothing for granted. Even those who are well known enough to be invited to colleges and libraries for readings and lectures often discover that their work is not available to their audiences. It is not uncommon to see such writers carrying shopping bags filled with their books to these occasions. Neither does strictly literary fame insure wide audience recognition. James Baldwin and Toni Morrison are much celebrated in the literary world and yet one can enter any school and find that students do not know who they are; of course, such ignorance pertains to many celebrated white writers as well, but it is especially serious in the case of blacks, who are often in danger of having almost no audience whatever. The only lasting remedy for the situation of the black writer will require both a greater appreciation and recognition of black literature within American society as a whole and the development of literary institutions in the black community that will make the work of black writers more accessible there.

Of course, our desire to reach a larger audience in this way is hampered by our failure to resolve a number of interrelated problems: first, the illiteracy rate in the black community; second, the shortage of journals and publishing firms run by and for blacks; third, the difficulty of keeping books by black writers in print, and fourth, the propensity of the literary establishment to ignore all but a very few black writers.

As far as the literacy problem is concerned, black writers can play a small role in removing some of the educational obstacles that limit their audience. By becoming active in public schools and libraries they can help create the sort of enthusiasm that inspires children to read. We also need more children's books by black writers, and we need to keep those still in print on the shelves of libraries and bookstores. These are only the minimum responses to a major

E. Ethelbert Miller is the director of the Afro-American Resource Center at Howard University.

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problem, but until a nationwide literacy campaign is successful, it is the least we can do.

With the creation of black studies programs at American colleges during the late 1960s, the demand for black publications suddenly increased. Major publishing houses took advantage of the "new" market. The work of a number of black writers who had been ignored for years was quickly reprinted. New writers were encouraged to submit manuscripts to America's leading publishers. Not since the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s had black writers been so openly courted.

Unfortunately, with the subsequent change of political climate in the 1970s, black writing fell out of favor with the literary establishment. Today, teachers who continue to teach the work of black writers encounter increasing difficulty obtaining material for their courses. Too often they are told by publishers that the book requested is out of print. How can a writer develop an audience if readers cannot find his or her work?

It appears that as long as black writers are largely dependent upon publishers who are not part of their communities, they will suffer when someone decides their work is no longer profitable. Black-owned publishing firms are one solution to the problem of keeping books by blacks in print. Although profit is essential to the running of any business, one must at the very least demand that people who participate in the book business also make a commitment to literature. Black publishers and editors must make this commitment. The development of an audience for black writers will advance alongside the growth of new literary institutions committed to their writing. □

Think Small Press

GUNDARS STRADS

In the 1960s, the term "minority" underwent a shift in emphasis. It became less a quantitative concept than a term designating those segments of our society that possess valuable ethnic, cultural or racial backgrounds. Once discovered, "minorities" began to command special attention, and in publishing they became a marketable "trend." Having become a "fashion," minorities were naturally susceptible to the liabilities and limitations of all fads. Now that backlash is in vogue, these once-special people are being reminded that they are still "minor," both in numbers and in value. Major publishers are taking fewer and fewer "risks" with minority writers; trade lists reflect the current unease about the market for minority literature.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, minority writers and editors, perhaps foreseeing the inevitable decline in enthusiasm for their work among major publishers, began forming their own presses, magazines and journals. But much of the marketplace, following the rules set down by the publishing establishment, has treated such small press endeavors as curiosities. They have usually been relegated either to specialty stores or to specialty shelves in mainstream bookstores. Even in academic bookstores, where managers should know better, Native American poets can be found stocked in anthropology sections, black novelists are found not on the fiction shelves but in the ethnic studies sections and Chicano publications are often filed under foreign languages. Minority presses frequently find that their best customers are libraries, where at least their books are properly catalogued.

Government and foundation grants to minority presses often perpetuate the attitude in the literary community that minorities require special assistance. Nevertheless, minority publishers have made a virtue out of their need to specialize. And so we find that the various Asian, Chicano and Native American presses are each seeking their own share of the market, and that despite the ignorance and resistance of many booksellers, they are reaching an audience—one that major publishers have been unable to locate. In addition, cross-pollination has been the result of the camaraderie evident in the small-press circuit, and that is in itself a welcome change from the atmosphere of secrecy and competition among major publishers. □

Gundars Strads is the executive director of the Before Columbus Foundation, a promotion and distribution organization for multicultural literary small presses.

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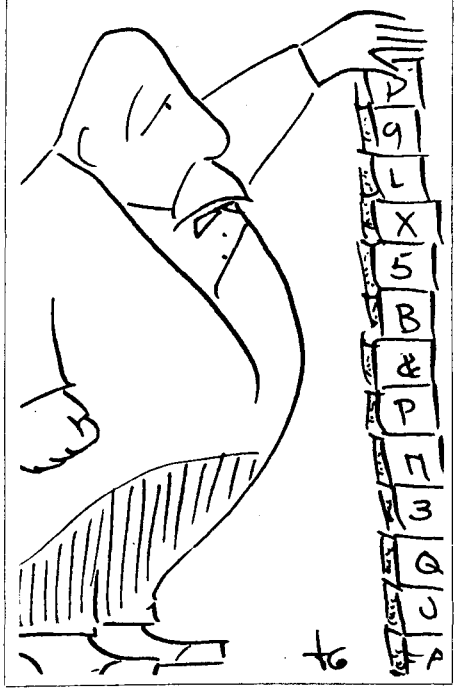

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WRITERS' UNIONS

Solidarity—Ever?

MARGOT COHEN AND DAVE LINDORFF

I think trade union organization ought to do for book reviewers and special article writers what has been done for newspaper writers, reporters and editors. There ought to be a scale of minimum rates established. Freelancers should not be living on the edge of starvation as they do now. It seems to me that this Congress ought to start a movement to see that . . . writers are adequately paid.

Henry G. Alsberg, director of the Federal Writers Project, made this statement in 1937 at the time of the Second Writers Congress, but it applies equally well to the state of affairs on the eve of the October 1981 Writers Congress.

During the 1930s, reporters and screenwriters built strong trade unions, while other writers organized and compelled the Federal government to include them in its public jobs programs. Even the Authors Guild, one of the most enduring organizations of American writers (it traces its lineage back to 1912), was pressured by some of its members to follow the lead of its sister organization, the Dramatists Guild, in trying to function more as a trade union and less as a business organization.

While the screenwriters' union has held its own, the Newspaper Guild, along with most of the American trade union movement, has become increasingly bureaucratic. Few traces remain of the political solidarity that existed among writers four or five decades ago, despite threats to the environment and to civilization itself that in some ways far surpass the dangers of fascism that helped mobilize and unify writers in the 1930s. While the number of publishing houses dwindles to a handful of vertically integrated conglomerates, and while writers remain isolated in their dealings with them, there are nevertheless visible shudders in the office of the Authors Guild these days at the mention of the word "union."

Certainly anyone who wonders whether it is possible or desirable for writers to organize around political issues or form trade unions should look at that brief period during the 1930s when significant numbers of them did both.

America was gripped by organizing fever in the 1930s, and writers responded with vigor, forming the American Newspaper Guild (now the Newspaper Guild), the Screen Writers Guild (now the Writers Guild of America), the Writers Union, the Unemployed Writers Association and the League of American Writers. "The industrial workers who were just beginning to organize were a source of inspiration and a beacon of social vision to writers," says Allen Wald, an associate professor of English at the University of Michigan. "The writers' movement welcomed radicals."

And radicals welcomed the movement. The importance of the Communist Party in the organizing drives among writers in this period can scarcely be overstated. And the Party and its agenda can also be held accountable for at least some of the resistance to organizing that exists among writers today. Though few writers belonged to the Party, the unity and discipline of those who did gave them disproportionate influence in writers' organizations. In fact, many of the activities that brought writers and artists together were at first largely directed by Communists.

"Party discipline was very important," says Paul Romaine, a one-time Party member who was an early organizer of the John Reed Clubs and the first Congresses. "It made it seem ten times stronger than it ever was."

It is clear now, as it was to many at the time, that the Party manipulated writers' organizing efforts for its own ends, often in ways that were harmful to individual writers. Non-Party writers in the John Reed Clubs were left hanging when the Party abruptly decided in 1934 to dissolve the clubs as part of its new "People's Front" policy and to create the more selective League of American Writers.

Kenneth Burke, who was invited to give a paper on "Revolutionary Symbolism" at the First Congress in 1935, recalls the experience of running afoul of the Party. "I was extremely eager to be loved," he says. "After I wrote the article, I read it to a friend who I am fairly certain was a Party member. He loved it. When I delivered it, it ran a little long because I did some improvising, and John Howard Lawson tried to cut me off. I waved the last page to the audience and said I only had a little more to go. They all applauded, so I went ahead, feeling pretty good. But when I finished, Mike Gold and several other Party members got up and boy, did they lambaste me! I was slaughtered! By the time they were all through with me, I was at the bottom of the world. I even heard two women walking out of the hall in front of me talking about it, and one said, 'Gee, he *seemed* so honest.'" The problem, says Burke, was that in some minor way he had "stumbled against the Party line."

But while such behavior by Party members left lasting scars and may have discouraged a generation of writers from serious organizing, it is not accurate to write off the Party's role as totally negative—something it has been fashionable to do since the McCarthy era. According to Diana Trilling, "Whatever the terrible harm done by the Communist Party, it also provided a very positive organizing program. It served as a most extraordinary catalyst for organizing writers and artists."

With the Party focused on the issue of fascism's advance in Europe, little was done at the First Congress to address economic issues at home; but with so many writers out of work, the matter was given more attention at subsequent Congresses.

Persuaded by Alsberg's speech, the Second Congress framed and passed two of its resolutions in response to it. According to *The Writer in a Changing World*, a record of the 1937 proceedings, "The fifteenth [resolution]

Margot Cohen was a member of The Nation*'s intern program. Dave Lindorff, a freelance magazine writer, is a member of the Organizing Committee for a National Writers Union and co-chair of the New York Area Media Alliance. Josh Kornbluth, assistant managing editor of* In These Times*, assisted with the interviews for this article.*

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urged all members of the League of American Writers to join trade unions in their respective fields. The sixteenth asked all writers to communicate to the C.I.O. their willingness to help this newly organized army of labor."

Nothing concrete came of the resolutions, and the league did not try to transform itself into a union. "Nobody had a publisher, so we couldn't organize against publishers," Franklin Folsom, at one time executive secretary of the league, explains.

From 1933 to 1935, four writers' groups tried to use their organizations to alleviate the deplorable work conditions brought about by the Depression. The American Newspaper Guild held its first convention in Washington, D.C., the Screen Writers Guild organized in Hollywood, and the Writers Union and the Unemployed Writers Association gathered support around the country. (The U.W.A. quickly merged with the Writers Union.)

The role of celebrities in these movements is worth noting. Jack Conroy, once a member of the Writers Union, says, "It really began through efforts to get Maxwell Bodenheim a writing job—he had a pick-and-shovel job. Everyone said, 'Look at that. A famous writer has a pick-and-shovel job. He should be writing.' We organized a demonstration which started the Federal Writers Project. I guess you would say the union started then."

Heywood Broun founded the American Newspaper Guild while he was one of the best-paid and most widely read columnists in the country. A strongly worded column, together with his prestige, persuaded many other journalists to join the guild.*

Prominent screenwriters gave financial support to their union in its early stages. The late Nancy Schwartz, in her forthcoming book, *The Hollywood Writers Wars*, says, "It was difficult to explain to studio executives that the intent of the union, though led by many of these prestigious, literary figures, was really to protect the young, beginning writers." But celebrities were not always helpful. Meridel LeSueur, once a member of the Writers Union, says that the number of well-known writers in the New York chapter led to elitism, and eventually to the demise of the group.

Tension also developed over New York's role in the Screen Writers Guild. In the mid-1930s, the S.W.G. planned to affiliate with the Authors League, a New York-based umbrella organization that includes the Authors and Dramatists Guilds. Many screenwriters were concerned that their union, with most of its members in Hollywood, would be controlled from New York. But the advantages of solidarity overcame these fears. Later, when the Authors League found it cumbersome to address the needs of so many different kinds of writers, the groups discontinued the affiliation.

But if elitism in New York had damaged the Writers Union, regionalism was to prove fatal to it. "I don't remember much national militancy. The groups around the country seemed to keep to themselves," LeSueur says. Though the union's militancy helped secure jobs for thousands of unemployed writers, it was not resilient enough to survive the decline of the Federal Writers Project.

Feuds between and within writers' organizations were common in the 1930s. In 1936, some of the more conservative screenwriters, with the support of many producers, established a group called the Screen Playwrights, which at one point eliminated the Screen Writers Guild as a bargaining agent. Members of the S.W.G. were blacklisted, and the dispute severed many professional and personal ties. The S.W.G. began to rebuild underground, and, in 1938, it won a National Labor Relations Board election. By offering membership to young writers, it triumphed numerically over the more selective Screen Playwrights.

In the early 1940s, writers temporarily united behind one issue: World War II. The Hollywood Writers Mobilization and the University of California sponsored a conference in 1943 to help writers "learn to write of the war effort [and to] mobilize all writers to dedicate their creative abilities to the winning of the war." In 1949, a group called the National Council of the Arts, Sciences and Professions, to which many writers belonged, sponsored a three-day conference on world peace at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City.

But the postwar years saw a breakdown in this unity. For one thing, writers had trouble finding issues—political or economic—around which to organize. In large part, of course, this was because of the political atmosphere of the time, with its Red-baiting and blacklisting. Not only were many writers blocked from employment but they were encouraged by Congressional committees to turn on one another.

Eve Merriam, playwright and Dramatists Guild activist, recalls a few "insignificant" gatherings of writers in the years immediately after the end of World War II, when, she says, "there was some naïve hope that there would be a rapprochement between the United States and the Soviet Union." But, she adds, this hope was short-lived: "The intimidation of writers during the 1950s was really fierce. People were terrified. Even in the early 1960s, when an 'insurgent group' within the Authors Guild proposed that we meet more than once a year, people thought it was some kind of 'Red caucus.' "

But if the idea of organizing into a trade union had faded completely, the 1960s still saw many writers becoming involved in political activities—though not always as writers or as a group. "In the 1960s, most people were not organizing according to profession," says Wald. "They were organizing according to broad social issues like civil rights, the antiwar movement, the feminist movement and the gay liberation movement."

In 1970, a feminist group called Media Women staged a sit-in at the offices of *The Ladies' Home Journal*. "We wanted to highlight the fact that womens' magazines were selling messages against our interests," organizer-writer Susan Brownmiller says. *The Journal* agreed to print an eight-page supplement to a future issue of the magazine detailing the group's ideas. In 1972, Brownmiller also helped organize some of the women who did freelance work for *The New York Times* in order to lobby for the hiring of more female editors.

During the height of the Vietnam War and the antiwar movement, many writers started their own publications, such as *Ramparts*, *The Los Angeles Free Press*, *The Old Mole* and *The Berkeley Barb*. While offering little in the way of financial remuneration, these publications were rallying points for writers at a time when many of them considered themselves to be "outside the system" of the established media. Writers seemed to be developing an awareness of themselves as almost a class apart. This awareness was evident

*Although the Guild began as an organization for editorial employees, it quickly expanded to include clerical, administrative and other white-collar workers in the newspaper industry. District 65 of the United Auto Workers would later use this organizing approach in publishing houses.

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even among academic writers, as the (usually) younger scholars in fields like economics, history and sociology established "alternative" professional associations and journals. The Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, which broke away from the staid Association of Asian Scholars in 1968, was one such organization. C.C.A.S. produced its own journal, the *Bulletin*, in which the roots of American involvement in Asia were discussed—a topic that had been avoided for years by the A.A.S.

As the Vietnam War came to an end, many of these alternative organizations and publications, having lost their *raison d'être*, folded. But the notion of writers as a class seemed to have taken hold. During the 1970s, as a wave of mergers and acquisitions swept over the publishing industry, many writers recognized the importance of working collectively to protect their own interests. Other collective efforts were politically motivated. Writer Mary Alice Kellog recalls that during the 1968 Democratic National Convention, "we journalists were getting the shit kicked out of us." Partly in response to what happened at the convention, a number of regional journalism reviews, beginning with the *Chicago Journalism Review*, were established. In 1972, *[MORE]* magazine, the most widely read of these publications, sponsored the first of a series of A. J. Liebling Counter-Conventions (more commonly called *[MORE]* Conventions).

There is much disagreement about the role and the effectiveness of the conventions. According to Kellog, "There were prounion noises, but it wasn't so much a union per se we were trying to form. We were trying to figure out how the writer could have a say [over the product] . . . to change the image of the writer as an impotent, indentured employee." But Richard Pollak, then an editor of *[MORE]*, wrote in the July 1975 issue of the magazine, "Whatever the virtues of 'democracy in the newsroom,' very few journalists are interested in pursuing it. Most accept management control as an irrevocable given and come to the conventions to socialize, seek jobs and learn."

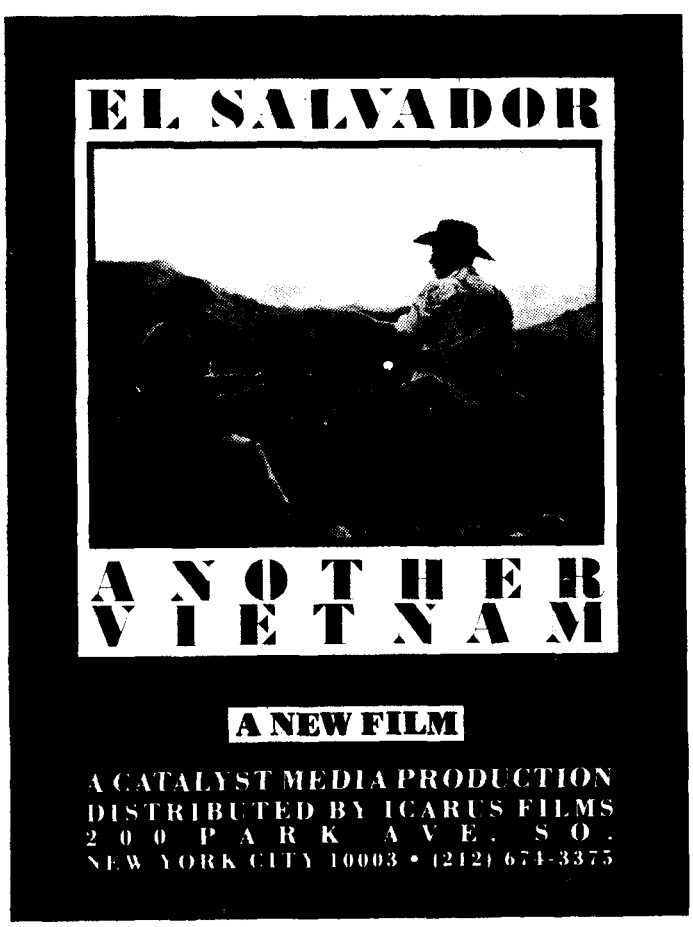
But the *[MORE]* conventions were not just gatherings of disaffected journalists. There was, of course, the carnival atmosphere to be expected at any counterculture event. But the conventions did take at least one important organizational step.

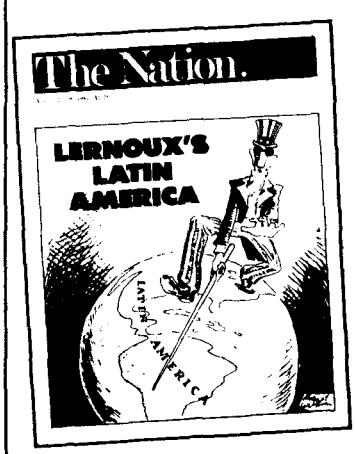
A sign-up sheet at the 1975 convention was the beginning of Media Alliance, a San Francisco-based group that now includes more than 1,600 staff and freelance writers, photographers and editors, and broadcast and public relations workers.

In 1976, Media Alliance supported the Newspaper Guild strike at the San Francisco *Bay Guardian*. "We pulled an extremely effective boycott," says Ken McEldowney, a founding member and former coordinator of M.A. "No experienced professionals wrote for the *Bay Guardian* during that strike. Basically, the paper has never recovered." (The *Bay Guardian* still exists, but its circulation has declined since the strike.)

Media Alliance also negotiated the first contract for freelance writers in the United States. In 1979, a small progressive company called Pacific News Service agreed to meet the standards and working conditions for writers proposed by Media Alliance.

The organization has recently been through a period of internal dissension. It would like to have a national reputa-





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tion, but some members believe it has neither the resources nor the internal stability to expand at this time. "Media Alliance is in a weakened state right now," David Talbot, the group's secretary, says. "We can't put our energy into proselytizing other parts of the country."

Neither Media Alliance nor any of the similar groups formed in cities such as New York, Boston, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles and Chicago have tried to become a writers' union, but their existence clearly demonstrates a strong desire on the part of many writers for something more than just a professional association.

There may in fact be legal problems involved in forming such a union, and it is by no means certain that a writers' union could withstand a court challenge by publishers on the issue of a closed shop, for example. If the courts held that writers were independent contractors rather than employees, a union could be ruled in restraint of trade. On the other hand, screenwriters and musicians, many of whom freelance for numerous employers, are unionized.

Historically, the labor movement in America has had to violate the laws until they were revised to accommodate labor's demands. But a far more important obstacle to writers' organizing is the lack of a collective identity. Alsberg also said at the Second Writers Congress that "the conceit of the average writer . . . separates him from the average worker." He could have added that it separates him or her from other writers, too.

The explanation most frequently given for writers' failure to organize is the one offered by Archibald MacLeish (an active participant in the First Writers Congress)—writers "have nothing in common." Or as Grace Paley put it, "The problem in trying to organize writers is that we all just sit alone and write. Writers are part of the great individualist self in American history. What other people do solitary kinds of work and still organize?" She paused to think and then laughed. "Air controllers! . . . I think the fact that the writers at P.E.N. backed me when I was arrested in Washington, and that they are backing Daniel Berrigan now, shows that there is a potential."

Paley is not alone in thinking that the current political situation could bring writers together. "I think something could happen," says Daniel Aaron, author of *Writers on the Left*. "The time may very well come, if the Reagan Administration continues its head-on confrontation with the Soviet Union while letting this country rot from within. That is the kind of thing that unites writers. But it may still be too soon."

Walter Rideout, author of *The Radical Novel in the U.S.: 1900-1954*, echoes this view. "What is required [for writers to organize] is a crisis like the Depression," he says. "I think we are in such a crisis, but the situation is much more amorphous now than during the Depression. The causes and goals are much less clear. Reagan is one of the great disastrous Presidents of all time, but it's hard to persuade large numbers of people that this is true. The tremendous cuts in the social budget haven't hit them yet. One feels a crisis coming, but can't tell what form it will take."

While Aaron is skeptical about the prospect of writers uniting around economic issues, he also notes that conditions are in some ways worse than they were in the Depression. "I'm sure there are more writers now than in the 1930s, and fewer places to publish," he

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says. "Maybe they weren't paying as much then, but you *could* get published. Now, with all the major publishers taken over by conglomerates, it's hard even to *find* a publisher. Many serious writers have had to go to the university presses."

Other writers are also pessimistic about the likelihood of writers coming together around economic issues. Howard Fast, who was an active organizer in the early days of the Screen Writers Guild, says, "The only successful organizing of writers that took place was where there was an industry: news writers, screenwriters and theater writers. Essentially it was always people who worked for an industry, except in the case of theater, where the organizing took the form of establishing a minimum contract. Even in theater, things were fairly similar everywhere within the industry. . . . It has never been possible to organize book writers, and for a very good reason. The variety of books is so great, and the political complexions of writers are so varied, you could never hope to establish a minimum contract."

Fast, who was involved in the efforts to unite writers against fascism, believes that any writers' movement that took a firm stand against the neutron bomb and nuclear war would have the support of "90 percent of the writers in this country," but he does not envision the formation of a movement comparable to the antifascist front. "The 1930s were [a time] of great hope, energy and excitement," he says. "Today we live in an era of hopelessness. People are bowing their heads to the inevitability of nuclear disaster, and surrendering to the forces of Reagan."

Brownmiller is also skeptical. "I think it's important for writers to remain eclectic," she says. "Groups tend to want to think cohesively, and that's bad for the writer."

Brownmiller says her views stem from her difficulties as an activist-writer, beginning with her work in the feminist movement. "There was a lot of hostility toward writers early in the movement," she recalls. "People thought we were ripping them off if we'd write about our experiences. If you came to a meeting they'd ask, 'Are you here to be one of us or are you here to write a piece for *The Times*?' It got so bad that I had to give up writing about [the movement] for about a year."

As to the idea of a writers' *union*, Brownmiller, a dedicated Authors Guild member, says simply, "We are bourgeois individualists, and we have no strike power. Can you expect an author who has worked for five years on a manuscript to withhold delivery of it to a publisher?"

Certainly the experience of the 1930s does not help us predict how writers will respond to the current situation. There have been crises in the past to which writers failed to rally or rallied late. But the early response to the call for a new Writers Congress, and recent independent regional efforts to organize writers, make it clear that something is happening. One clear test will be the response at the Congress to an effort by the Organizing Committee for a National Writers Union to sign up members and hold a founding convention. According to Media Alliance's McEldowney, "Writers are going to see more and more libel suits, more instances of reporters being imprisoned abroad and more people being subpoenaed for their pictures and notes. Those acts can only be combated by organizations. The self-interest of media workers will lie in their being more activist and political." □

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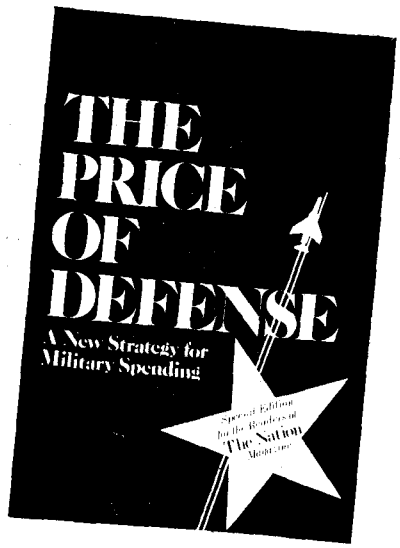

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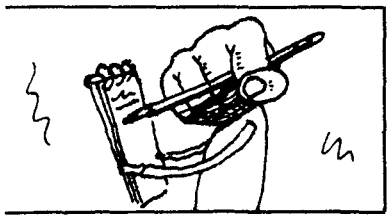

Writers Congress Diary

ANN MARIE CUNNINGHAM

Organizing toward the first American Writers Congress in four decades began a year ago when Ann Banks, author of First Person America, *joined The Nation Institute and, with the help of a grant from the Guinzburg Family Foundation, began exploring the desirability, feasibility and fundability of a national writers' meeting. By the end of 1980, it was clear that not only was such a gathering possible but, given the contemporary circumstances, it was imperative. A full-time director was needed, and Ann Marie Cunningham, a New York writer and editor and co-author of* The Techno-Peasant Survival Manual *(Bantam), was hired. What might be called her organizing notes, presented in diary form, follow.*

—The Editors

March 1981

Last night we held our first gathering at a loft belonging to Harry Maurer, a freelance journalist. We had spent weeks nailing down the wording of the call to the Congress. Although we were eloquent in expressing our unhappiness with the trend toward concentration in the communications industry, we wanted a statement of purpose that would serve as a tabula rasa, on which writers could fill in their own agenda. The next step would be to meet with other writers to find out what most concerns them.

The meeting drew about forty people, mostly freelance journalists and book writers, including biographers Nancy Milford and Madelon Bedell, and novelist Lois Gould. Many belong to The Writers Room, a cooperative whose members maintain a working place for writers that is open twenty-four hours a day. The Congress can, among other things, serve as a clearinghouse for ideas like this one—ways in which writers can help themselves.

At Harry's, there was much talk about a national writers' union. Canada, Britain, Sweden and many other countries already have such unions. America has a screen and television writers' union, the Writers Guild of America, whose members have gained the economic advantages of belonging to a union—but the studios have complete control over their scripts. Many at the meeting were members of national writers' organizations, but they felt these groups hadn't given them what they needed—bargaining power, especially in dealing with conglomerate-owned publishers. Publishing has changed, and so must writers.

"But you know what will happen," freelancer Mary Alice Kellog said after the meeting. "We'll just go on seeing each other in bars and complaining how badly we're treated and how much we need a union."

April

Fortunately, Mary Alice's prediction didn't come true. Some writers who met at Harry's conscripted others, and they've been meeting informally every week since March to hammer out a proposal for a national writers' union, which will be one of many matters on the Congress's agenda when it is convened in New York City on October 9.

Meanwhile, Kate Manning and I arranged a second meeting in New York. At this meeting, historian Blanche Weisen Cook told us that we were following the same procedures that had been used to organize the four American Writers Congresses held from 1935 to 1941. The writers who had organized those Congresses had also held preliminary meetings around the country to spread the word and make up the agendas. Noting that the same organizing techniques are being borrowed nowadays by the Moral Majority, Cook said it was high time we reclaimed them.

Of course, the earlier Congresses had a very precise political purpose: they were organized by the League of American Writers, the Communist Party's *apparat* for conscripting writers as "cultural workers." We agreed that our Congress must not be the creature of any single party or sect. Writers of all political (or apolitical) persuasions have been invited. In fact, the political coloration of the Congress seems secondary to the fundamental task of providing a forum to air, analyze and take action on writers' problems.

The second meeting, at the Riverside Drive apartment of Richard Pollak, then literary editor of *The Nation*, drew other scholars, critics, poets, novelists, journalists, playwrights, and screen and television writers. They were greatly concerned about censorship, especially the Moral Majority's proposed boycott of network television sponsors. Others had clashed with school boards, local libraries and bookstores: poet and playwright Eve Merriam called her collection of satiric poems, *The Inner City Mother Goose*, "the second most censored book in America." Playwright Ray Aranha, who had traveled from Connecticut for the meeting, brought up "monetary censorship"—the censorship imposed by the tastes dominating the marketplace, which make it impossible for most playwrights, especially members of minority groups, to earn a living.

The feeling that existing organizations were not meeting the needs of writers surfaced again. As one playwright said, "There are a bundle of writers who can't meet the Dramatists Guild's requirements for membership, and there are others who do belong but can't vote."

However, another participant interjected a cautionary note: "These organizations are important and should be involved in the Congress—there's no point in antagonizing writers who are already organized." As would happen again and again at later meetings, a suggestion was planted that would bear fruit in the Congress's program. Acting on this warning, we decided to hold a meeting with other writers' organizations at which they could explain what they now do on behalf of writers and we could explore areas of possible collaboration.

At these two meetings in New York, we also recruited several members of the Congress's program committee. Harry Maurer joined Kate and me on the full-time staff as program chairman. We are all freelancers, with the perennial cash-flow problems of the breed. The program committee became a melting pot of academics, journalists, poets, playwrights and literary bureaucrats. It began holding weekly meetings at which panel topics and panelists were discussed—often heatedly.

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May

At a fund-raising luncheon the question we've come to call "writers and the bomb" surfaced again: why should we bother talking about writers' economic survival when the greatest threat facing society is nuclear war? The Congress staff decided that insuring writers' economic well-being came first; it would enable those who chose to to continue to speak out and write about the bomb, not to mention other crucial issues.

It was becoming increasingly clear that the Congress's main focus—economic and political problems that all writers share—couldn't be divorced from the current political situation in the country. Evidently the Congress will have a distinctly progressive character. The bulk of the co-sponsoring publishers and other supporters have been of this stripe—not that there wasn't a real attempt to get a diversity of views among our panelists and on the inviting committee. When we asked Arthur Schlesinger Jr. to join the inviting committee, a group of well-known writers of varying political persuasions from all parts of the country, he demurred, noting that since *The Nation* had criticized him relentlessly over the years, it would be pointless to involve himself in a project the magazine supported.

The New Republic, *Commentary* and *Harper's* all turned down co-sponsorship, although *Harper's* gave us a full-page advertisement. *Mother Jones, The New York Review of Books, The Progressive* and forty other journals supported the Congress. Several have given us exchange ads; others volunteered to give parties. The Playboy Foundation donated $10,000.

June

With help from local writers, joined by distributors and booksellers, who seem to be indefatigable organizers, we've held meetings in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Charlottesville, Virginia, and Boston.

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Some themes brought up in the first two meetings have been reiterated in other cities. In New York, for example, screenwriter Ian Hunter had stressed that writers have to be familiar with the economic implications of new technologies such as videodiscs. In his contracts, he said, he now asks for income from "forms not yet invented." Similarly, at three separate meetings in Boston, hosted by Justin Kaplan and Anne Bernays (founder of Boston P.E.N.), Ann Banks (a regional coordinator for the Congress) and Bob Kuttner (editor of *Working Papers*), writers said that they were following very carefully the progress of the Writers Guild strike on the West Coast because its key issue was income from new technologies. They predicted a ripple effect: if developments such as videodiscs already affect screen and television writers, they will soon reach poets and scholars. When I held a week-long series of meetings with writers in northern California, Prof. Peter Stansky told me in his office at Stanford, "As a writer, I don't like having my work reproduced without earning any income, but as a teacher, how could I manage if I had to pay for the articles I Xerox for my classes?"

July and August

Summer failed to slow planning for the Congress. More meetings were held in Chicago, Philadelphia, Minneapolis and other cities, drawing forty to sixty writers in each city, including inviting-committee members Studs Terkel, Jerre Mangione, Douglas Day, Meridel LeSueur and Gerald Vizenor. The meeting places were as diverse as the writers. In Chicago, we convened in the basement of Guild Books; in Philadelphia, at Antioch University; in Minneapolis and Washington, in communal spaces local artists use for shows and happenings; in Charlottesville, at Rhoda and Leonard Dreyfus's house, which was designed by Thomas Jefferson.

In every one of the ten cities where we've organized ourselves, writers have been divided over the idea of a union, but united in their unhappiness with big publishing. The Writers Guild experience troubles many. In North Hadley, Massachusetts, at novelist Jay Neugeboren's house, critic and novelist Benjamin DeMott pointed out the pitfalls in having one's writing treated as "work-for-hire," and asked if unionizing was worth it at that price.

In Minneapolis, Meridel LeSueur, a poet who had attended the earlier Congresses and who has published mainly with small presses, complained, "I can't even buy my own book when a big publisher prices it at $14.95." LeSueur, who along with novelist and editor Toni Morrison will deliver opening speeches at the Congress on Friday, October 9, suggested that the New York weekend be followed, as the 1930s Congresses were, by regional assemblies. In the wake of two meetings in Los Angeles, screenwriters and black and Latino journalists who will not be able to come to New York have begun thinking about a southern California Congress that would draw writers from Arizona and New Mexico as well.

September

As word of the Congress spread, writers in upstate New York, Washington, D.C., Boston, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Chicago have begun holding meetings on their own. Poet Simon Ortiz and novelist John Nichols read at an Albuquerque benefit to help New Mexican writers pay their way to the Congress. After a first meeting in Chicago, writers there formed their own network, Chicago Writers Inc., which will continue to work on its members' behalf after the Congress.

Local writers organized a second Chicago meeting at Columbia College, which was held on September 11. After I described the Congress program, several leading figures in the local literary community rose to express their support. The meeting was a great success: 200 Chicagoans, representing all ages, colors and literary genres, came to pass the hat and clap vigorously when Vernon Jarrett, a columnist for *The Chicago Tribune*, emphasized writers' social responsibility. "At some point," Jarrett said, "we must say, 'No, you cannot buy us; we are not prostitutes.' " Curtis MacDougall, a former journalism professor at Northwestern University, retorted, to louder clapping, "But damn it, Vernon, it's the *publishers* who need principles."

MacDougall said that the call to the Congress "reminded me of how I felt when Heywood Broun wrote to tell me he wanted to start a Newspaper Guild." MacDougall planned to make himself "an obnoxious presence" for a writers' union at the Congress.

The next day, buoyed by the many pledges of support, we returned to New York, accompanied by most of the peo-

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ple who had organized gatherings all over the country and who had been urging local writers to attend the Congress. A meeting was convened at the New School for Social Research, and we spent the entire day discussing how to run the October conclave, which was now firmly scheduled for October 9-12 at the Roosevelt Hotel in New York, with a maximum of democracy but a minimum of chaos. We also had preliminary discussions about what directions the Congress's work might take after October 12. The final decision on that will be made by the delegates at the October 11 plenary session.

The meeting on September 12 reminded us why this project is called a congress, not a conference: the main goal is formulating concrete programs for bettering the writer's lot. Those writers interested in a union had constituted themselves into the Organizing Committee for a National Writers Union and presented a preliminary proposal. Dan Moldea, president of Washington Independent Writers, a large writers' network in the District of Columbia, suggested a more active alliance of writers' groups than the existing Council of Writers Organizations; others were interested in forming a new, activist group of "fighting writers," a National Rifle Association for writers. Latino writers from southern California and New Mexico, and black writers from Chicago and the District of Columbia, sent messages emphasizing their desire for a strong voice in the Congress's proceedings and in its aftermath.

Aside from the feeling of accomplishment these preliminary steps gave all of us, the Congress staff felt immensely buoyed by a room filled with people we had worked closely with over the last seven months—most of whom we had not known before the planning for the Congress began. Some we had known only as voices on the phone—voices that we could now match with faces.

The meeting on September 12 was the culmination of the series of writers' meetings we have held since March. Even as I write, more than fifty panels and workshops have been scheduled. More than 1,000 writers have registered to attend; P.E.N. and the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines have helped us organize hearings on censorship and on the impact of cuts in government funding of literature. As a result of feverish fund-raising and the generosity of individual writers, foundations, corporations and government agencies, we are only $15,000 short of our projected budget. Our staff of volunteers, interns and consultants is overflowing an office that now resembles a campaign headquarters. Our worry that more writers will appear than will fit into New York's Roosevelt Hotel is only partly eased by the knowledge that some panels will be broadcast live via National Public Radio satellite to the five Pacifica stations and various N.P.R. stations. To keep our perspective, we bear in mind Roy A. Blount Jr., who replied to our call to join the inviting committee with a letter full of typos. He requested a panel on typing. □

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